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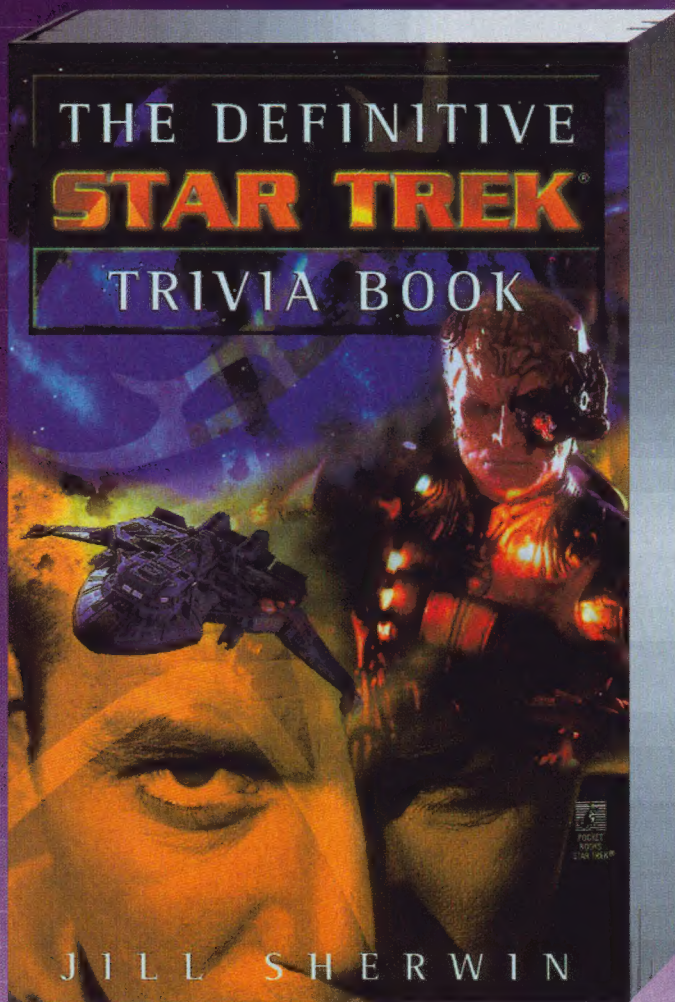


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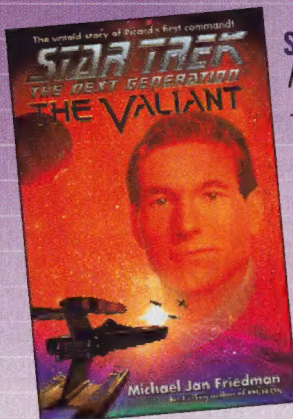
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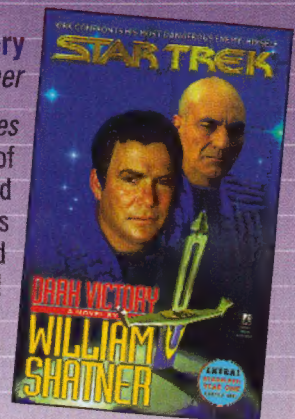


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AMAZING STORIES



VOLUME 72
ISSUE 1
NUMBER 601

About the Cover

The long-awaited film of
L. Ron Hubbard's classic
Battlefield Earth starring
John Travolta hits the big
screen this May.



Turn to page 78 for
the inside scoop on this
landmark movie.

From the Cover



18 Bedside Matters

by Greg Cox

Will Crusher come to terms—or to blows—
with her Emergency Medical Program?

24 The Laurel & Hardy Alpha Centauri Farewell Tour

by Ray Bradbury

In space, no one can hear you laugh.



70 Hybrid

by Micky Neilson

A new genetic experiment rekindles
Kerrigan's memories.

Fiction

30 In the Valley of the Thunder Quail

by Robert Reed

The bigger they are . . .

38 Selling Jesus

by Douglas Lain

Virtual spiritu-reality

48 Requiem With Interruptions

by G. Scott Huggins

A meeting of the minds

56 A Boost in Time

by Charles Harness

The real story behind the
demise of the dinosaurs.

60 The Reign of Rainbow Stars

by Christian L. Campbell

Thou shalt have no other
stars before these.

92 Reality Slough

by Kent Robinson

"And then Galileo
told Napoleon . . ."

Departments

4 FROM THE EDITOR

A Package Deal

6 DISPATCHES

Our readers sound off

8 OBSERVATORY

The Once and Future Mars
by Ben Bova

14 SCIENTIFICTION

Take Me to Your Leader
by John C. Bunnell

76 ASK DR. SCIENSE

Move over, Mister Wizard!
with help from Neal Barrett, Jr.

78 SILVER SCREEN

Countdown to
Battlefield Earth—
Travolta speaks about
his labor of love.
by Cory Herndon

84 GAME SPACE

Roleplaying in Battlefield Earth
by Steve Miller

96 TIME MACHINE

Looking in the Mirror?





From the Editor

A Package Deal

WHEN WE ASSEMBLE an issue of this magazine, we try to create a well-rounded package. We're always happy with the result, but sometimes we hit the target dead square. This is one of those times.

AMAZING® Stories is committed to covering science fiction in all its aspects. We seek out stories from the masters of the field, and we're also eager to publish fiction by writers who are just starting to make names for themselves. To complete the mix, our nonfiction features keep you up to date on what's happening in the real world.

So, what makes issue 601 such a perfect example of what we're all about? Let's run down a few of the reasons.

Headlining the fiction in this issue is Ray Bradbury's "The Laurel & Hardy Alpha Centauri Farewell Tour"—the first new Bradbury story to appear in this magazine in more than forty years. Although the author proclaims that he's not a science fiction writer (see page 29), I can't imagine any science fiction magazine editor turning down an opportunity to publish a Bradbury story. It's a professional and personal landmark for me to have a hand in bringing you the newest piece of work from one of the all-time masters of speculative fiction.

At the other end of the experience spectrum is Christian L. Campbell. He's never had a story published before now, but you wouldn't know that from reading "The Reign of Rainbow Stars." The setting is marvelously imaginative, the central characters are as engaging as they are unusual, and the strands of the plot are cleverly woven together, leading to an ending that manages to be poignant and amusing at the same time. (Keep an eye out for the homage to Bradbury neatly tucked into the text.) Ever since the earliest issues—back when it was the only magazine devoted to science fiction—*AMAZING Stories* has had a reputation for showcasing new talent. Campbell is the latest in a long list of writers who've made their debuts in these pages, and I have a feeling that his first appearance won't be his last.

By the time this issue hits your newsstand or your mailbox, we'll be about six weeks away from the release of a grand cinematic enterprise—*Battlefield Earth* the movie. To bring you up to speed on how the film came to be, and how L. Ron Hubbard's epic novel was "translated" from the medium of print to the big screen, Cory Herndon talked to star and coproducer John Travolta, director Roger Christian, and screenwriter Cory Mandell to produce this issue's "Silver Screen" column. This issue's package would not have been complete without our coverage of the filming of the bestselling science fiction novel of all time.

Every magazine, by definition, is made up of its component pieces. The best sort of magazine is one in which all the pieces appeal to every reader—that's what a well-rounded package is, and that's what you have in your hands right now.

KIM MOHAN
Editor-in-Chief

JOHNNY WILSON
GROUP PUBLISHER

WENDY NORITAKE
PUBLISHER

KIM MOHAN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SHAUNA WOLF NARCISO
ART DIRECTOR

SUE WEINLEIN COOK
MANAGING EDITOR

PAMELA MOHAN
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

JOHN DUNN
PRODUCTION MANAGER

BOBBI MAAS
ASSISTANT PRODUCTION
MANAGER

BOB HENNING
ADVERTISING SALES MANAGER
425-204-7262
<BOB@WIZARDS.COM>

PIERCE WATTERS
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

DAWNELLE MIESNER
CIRCULATION ASSISTANT

NORTHEASTERN ADVERTISING
REPRESENTATIVE
SCOTT BUCHMAYR
BUCHMAYR ASSOCIATES
137 ROWAYTON AVENUE
ROWAYTON, CT 06863
PH 203-888-8834
FAX 203-888-9138
<SBUCHMAYR@WORLDNET.ATT.NET>



AMAZING Stories [ISSN 1058-0751] is published quarterly by Wizards of the Coast, Inc., 1801 Lind Ave. SW, Renton, WA 98055, United States of America. Periodicals Postage Pending at Renton, WA, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO *AMAZING STORIES*, P.O. BOX 449084, ESCONDIDO, CA 92029.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: To subscribe to *AMAZING Stories*, call 800-395-7760 or email <amazing@pcspublink.com>. Subscriptions are available within the U.S. at \$10.95 for 4 issues, \$19.95 for 8, or \$29.95 for 12 issues. For subscription inquiries, contact <amazing@pcspublink.com>. In Canada, subscriptions are US \$14.95 for 4 issues, \$29.95 for 8 issues and \$44.95 for 12 issues. Foreign orders: 8 issues \$54.86 (US funds only).

For general information about *AMAZING Stories* magazine: Call 425-204-7224, M-F, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (PST) or email <amazing@wizards.com>.

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Dispatches

Once More with Feeling

Kudos to Harlan

Dear Mr. Moban,

Although very different stories, I couldn't help but wonder if any of the inspiration for the evil "six" in Harlan Ellison's story in your fabulous six hundredth issue was drawn from the good "seven" in Clifford D. Simak's wonderful Martian tale "Mirage."

Mars has always occupied a very strange place in my heart. . .

"Of all the places I've never been,
I miss Mars the most.

Burroughs, Wells and Wyndham,
all the classic themes,
still live and always will,
on Mars,

the planet of my dreams."

Thanks to Mr. Ellison for his delightful contribution to the Mars genre and thanks to you for keeping *AMAZING Stories* alive to enthrall yet another generation of science fiction fans.

Sincerely,

JOSEPH M. SHEA
Washington DC



Blending New and Old

Dear Editor,

Congratulations on yet another milestone for the father of SF magazines! Issue number 600 is a beauty! Congratulations are also due for landing the marvelous Harlan Ellison novella. I like the way *AMAZING* is blending good, new SF with the nostalgic feel of the old "pulp" days.

Be sure to tell your readers about the new *Captain Proton* book for more of what you presented of him in issue number 598. I'm sure they'll also want to know about the new *Science Fiction of the Twentieth Century: an Illustrated History* by Frank M. Robinson (who was an employee of *AMAZING* in the mid-1940s).

One minor quibble with Mr. Zebrowski's essay on classic SF films, specifically, *Metropolis*: In the late days of silent movies, musical scores were composed to be performed with some major films, including *Metropolis*. I have it on good authority that the written score still exists,

but no recordings have yet surfaced.

SF's history is my passion (and my business, as managing editor of two nostalgia magazines). Add my name to the list of those who look forward to reading the next 600 issues of *AMAZING Stories*!



Sincerely yours,

JAMES J. J. WILSON
Chicago IL

Babylon 5 Feedback

Dear Editor,

I received my subscription copy of *AMAZING* 599 in the mail the other day. Naturally, the first thing I did was to devour the new *Babylon 5* story. Great stuff. I look forward to that third *B5* story that you and J. Michael Straczynski have been promising.

I do have a small quibble, though. You made a mistake in your listing of "Babylon 5 fiction" that appears on page 23. You list *Point of No Return* but it is not fiction. It is, in fact, the third volume of Jane Killick's wonderful season-by-season episode guides. Another thing you need to add is the one-volume hardback of J. Gregory Keyes's *PsiCorps* trilogy that the SF Book Club is offering. It is titled, appropriately enough, *The PsiCorps Trilogy*.

PHILIP B. STEPHENS
Dallas TX

Hugo's Nephew Speaks Out

Editor,

I was quite surprised to find another photo of my uncle, Hugo Gernsback, in the "Special Collector's Edition." I was, however, quite disappointed that the caption describes Hugo as a "legendary cheapskate."

Indeed the first stories by H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allen Poe graced the first edition of *AMAZING*. It is important to note that Hugo was not "cheating" anyone by publishing those stories.

Hugo never once claimed that these stories were new, but the concept of an all

science fiction publication WAS a new idea. I'd like Mr. Silverberg to explain exactly why he considers Hugo a "cheater" by publishing these stories—many young people at the time had never read any of this material—so he did them a favor at his own financial risk.

I have read them many times, and still feel that these stories should be required reading for any science fiction fan. Furthermore, I would be willing to bet that many young science fiction fans today have not read these works.

PATRICK MERCHANT
Via email

On behalf of Mr. Silverberg, I'll point out that there's a big difference between "cheapskate" and "cheat." The fact that Hugo was not easily separated from his money is well documented in a number of sources. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever contended that he was cheating the early readers of this magazine by publishing reprinted stories. Mr. Silverberg's article certainly does not make such an assertion. — KM

Dr. Science Fan

Dear Editor,

A year or so ago I subscribed to *AMAZING Stories* mainly because I was so impressed by the breadth and depth of knowledge displayed by Dr. Science (despite his obvious spelling problems), but I've also really enjoyed another feature: the reproductions of the old pulp covers. Great stuff! And now you're bringing me stories by Howard Waldrop and Paul Di Filippo. I'm glad I took the plunge.

BILL CRIDER
Via email



➡ "Dispatches" is the department where we print letters you send us. Tell us what you think of the magazine. Tell us how to make it better. If you have an opinion about some aspect of science fiction that the world needs to hear, tell us about that, too, and we'll tell it to the world.

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The Once and Future Mars

WHAT FASCINATES US SO ABOUT THE planet Mars? The answer lies in a single word: *life*. For thousands of years humans have stared at the beckoning stars shining in the night sky and wondered if any of them could be the abode of living creatures. For more than a century now, Mars has been regarded as the most likely place to find extraterrestrial life.

Mars is the only planet whose surface can be seen from earthbound telescopes. Venus and the distant gas giant worlds are perpetually covered with clouds. Mercury is barely discernible from Earth; Pluto a mere speck of light. Our own Moon, airless and waterless, is a barren ball of rock.



▲ **WAR OF THE WORLDS.** Commonly referred to as the red planet, Mars is the fourth planet from the sun. It was given its name by the Romans in honor of their god of war.

An Earthlike World?

Mars is the most Earthlike planet in the solar system. Its axial tilt is similar to Earth's. It spins about its axis in just a little more than 24 hours. It has obvious polar caps, which shrink in the summer and form again in the winter. Mars has seasons.

Does life exist there?

In 1877 the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli reported seeing straight-line markings on

the ruddy face of Mars. He called them *canale*, meaning "channels." American astronomer Percival Lowell, among others, misinterpreted Schiaparelli's conservative description. When Lowell peered at the red planet, he saw *canals*. Lots of them.

Scion of a wealthy Boston family, Lowell had the money and time to build an observatory in Flagstaff. There, in Arizona's clear air, he spent the rest of his life studying those "canals." He postulated that Mars was a dying world, its supply of water (and air) slowly leaking away into space. Intelligent Martian engineers had built the canal system, Lowell believed, to carry water from the polar caps to the cities in the encroaching global desert.

Most astronomers pointed out that Mars was too cold and dry for liquid water to exist on its surface. They even claimed that the polar caps were not water ice at all, but frozen carbon dioxide: dry ice.

Still, Lowell doggedly continued to produce extensive maps of Martian canal systems for several decades. When skeptics pointed out that canals would be much too thin to be discerned over the distance between the two planets, Lowell and his followers ingeniously countered that what the telescopes detected was not the canals themselves, but the bands of vegetation—farmlands—on either side of the canals.

Faced with the contention that water would quickly evaporate in the dry, thin Martian atmosphere, the "canalists" proposed that the Martians were clever enough to cover the water's surface with a slick of oil or perhaps even roof over their canals.

It was Lowell's vision of Mars that inspired H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* and Edgar Rice Burroughs's lush adventures of John Carter, Warlord of Barsoom. Burroughs's fiction, in a turn of cosmic feedback, inspired a young Carl Sagan to search for life on other worlds, particularly Mars.

The Canals Disappear

In a sense, the Martian canals were indeed created by intelligent minds: the minds of Lowell and other human observers who believed they saw them.

With the telescopes available in their day, those astronomers were peering out at the far edge of observability. They saw a faint, ruddy disc, shimmering in and out of focus because of the turbulence in Earth's atmosphere. Their minds connected faint blobs of markings into straight lines—partially an optical illusion, partially a classic case of seeing what you dearly want to see.

When spacecraft began observing Mars from close up, in the 1960s, the canals disappeared.

Mars at a Glance

Distance from Sun
1.85 AU (Earth = 1 AU)

Year

686.98 Earth days

Day

24 hrs. 37 mins.

Diameter

6,787 km (4,222 miles),
or 0.53 of Earth

Mass

0.107 of Earth

Density

3.9 x water
(Earth = 5.5 x water)

Surface gravity

0.38 of Earth

Escape velocity

5.00 km/sec
(3.11 miles/sec)

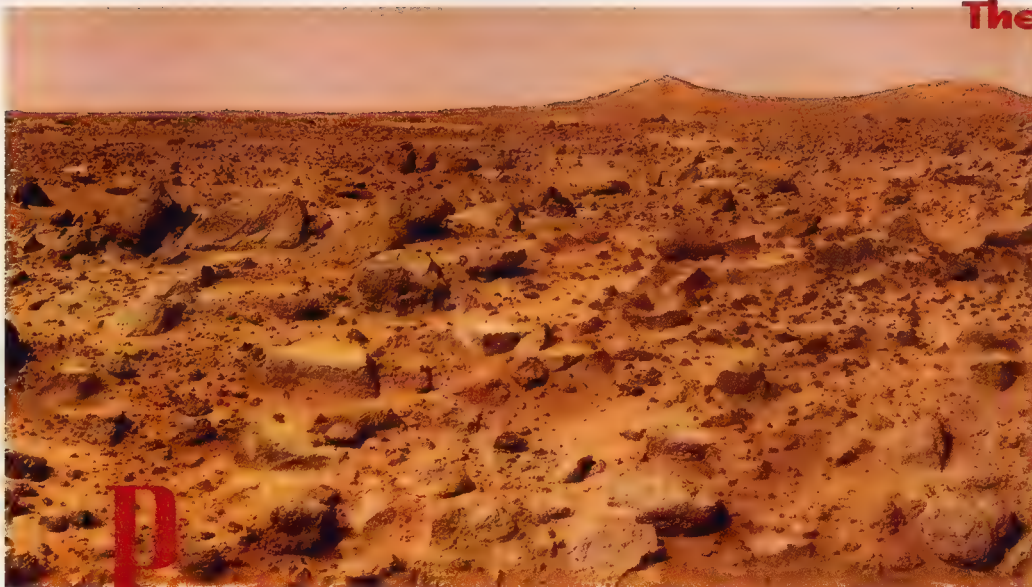
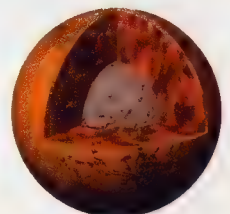
Average surface

temperature

-62.7°C (-81°F)

Atmosphere

95.3% CO₂, 2.7% N₂,
1.6% argon, 0.2% O₂



Picture Death Valley at its worst. Barren desert. Nothing but rock and sand. Now freeze-dry the whole landscape. And suck away the air . . .

They were never there. The pitiless cameras aboard a succession of NASA *Mariner* spacecraft showed no canals, no cities, no Martians—only an utterly barren sandy waste of desert and lots of craters. To the earliest space probes, such as *Mariner 4*, Mars looked more like the battered, lifeless face of the Moon than a planet where John Carter could swing a sword.

Incidentally, some space scientists are half convinced that Mars may be inhabited after all—by evil gremlins. Of the twenty-eight missions launched to the red planet by the United States and the USSR, only ten have returned usable data. Most crashed on launch or went defunct as they neared Mars.

The year 1999 was particularly bad for Mars explorations. In September, the *Mars Climate Orbiter* burned up in the thin Martian atmosphere, apparently because the spacecraft's builders (Lockheed Martin Astronautics) used English measurements to define the spacecraft's momentum while its operators (NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory) thought that the figures were expressed in metric units. As a result, the *Climate Orbiter* was inadvertently programmed to dip too deeply into the red planet's atmosphere; it burned up, instead of establishing itself in orbit at a safe altitude.

Then, in December, the *Mars Polar Lander* simply disappeared. After a near-perfect flight to Mars, the spacecraft's radio signal blinked out when the lander was commanded to land near Mars's south pole. Was it swallowed up by dust, or

did it crash on landing? Did irate Martians smash it, in protest against uninvited snoops from the third planet? No one knows.

Mars Today

Spacecraft observations have shown that Mars is indeed very cold and very dry.

As I said in my 1992 novel, *Mars*:

"Picture Death Valley at its worst. Barren desert. Nothing but rock and sand. Remove every trace of life: get rid of each and every cactus, every bit of scrub, all the lizards and insects and sun-bleached bones and anything that even looks as if it might once have been alive.

"Now freeze-dry the whole landscape. Plunge it down to a temperature of a hundred below zero. And suck away the air until there's not even as much as you would find on Earth a hundred thousand feet above the ground.

"That is roughly what Mars is like."

If you were standing on the equator of Mars in midsummer, the ground temperature might climb as high as 70° Fahrenheit. But the temperature at the level of your nose would be close to zero, because the Martian atmosphere is so thin that it retains very little heat. If there are any Martians, one thing they don't have to worry about is a greenhouse effect!

The overnight temperature would plummet to lower than a hundred degrees below zero. That's in midsummer. On the equator.

If you uncapped a bottle of water anywhere on Mars, any time of the night or day, the water

The Observatory

Geocentric Terminology

Strictly speaking, terms such as “terrain” and “geography” should not be applied to Mars.

Both the *ter* and *geo* roots refer to Earth. Since Ares was the ancient Greek name for the god that the Romans called Mars, purists use the *areo* root when referring to Martian characteristics.

However, “areorain” and “areography” (not to mention “areology” or “areochemistry”) sound awkward and unfamiliar. Hence the technically oxymoronic terms “Martian terrain,” “Martian geology,” etc., will undoubtedly be used both by the general public and all but the most puritanical of specialists.

would quickly boil away, despite the frigid temperature. The atmospheric pressure is far too low to permit water to remain liquid.

Most of Mars is a bone-dry desert of sandy iron oxides: rusty iron dust. Because its atmosphere is so thin, and its planetary magnetic field so weak, hard radiation from the Sun and cosmic rays from deep space bathe Mars’s surface with lethal radiation doses.

There is water on Mars, although it is not liquid. The bright polar caps are composed partially of frozen water, covered over most of the year by frozen carbon dioxide.

Much of Mars is heavily cratered, the southern hemisphere obviously moreso than the northern. The craters surprised scientists when they were first revealed by the early *Mariner* probes. In retrospect, it should have been no surprise: Mars is much closer to the asteroid belt, where meteoroids originate, than Earth is. And its atmosphere is too thin to erase craters through weathering, although the planetwide sandstorms that scour Mars could erode landscape features over very long periods of time.

Viking’s Enigmatic Results

In 1976 two *Viking* lander spacecraft soft-landed on Mars. Each carried three experiments designed to detect possible Martian life:

1. *Label release.* Radioactive carbon-14 was introduced to samples of soil scooped up by *Viking*’s remotely controlled arm, together with a nutrient mixture designed to feed any microorganisms that might be in the soil. If organisms were present, the gases given off by the soil sample would show a high percentage of carbon-14.

2. *Pyrolytic release.* A soil sample was mixed with

gases that simulated the Martian atmosphere (mostly carbon dioxide), dosed with a slight amount of radioactive carbon-14 as a “tracer,” and then exposed to a fluorescent light that simulated sunshine. If any Martian organisms that depended on photosynthesis were present, they should have multiplied vigorously in

such an environment. After five days, the gases were flushed out of the chamber and the soil was baked at a temperature of 625°C (1157°F). If the baked soil released a significant amount of carbon-14, it would be coming from organisms in the soil that took in the carbon dioxide.

3. *Gas exchange.* Soil samples were “incubated” in a water-rich nutrient bath (which the *Viking* scientists called “chicken soup”) and an atmosphere of carbon dioxide, krypton, and hydrogen. Living Martian organisms, if anything like those on Earth, would convert some of the carbon dioxide to free oxygen.

Each of the three *Viking* biology experiments showed results that seemed to indicate life—at first.

The gas exchange experiment showed a sharp increase in the amount of oxygen given off by the soil samples, although this soon leveled off. Both the pyrolytic release and the label release experiments also gave strong positive returns at first, followed by lower returns afterward.

In short, all three *Viking* experiments showed results that were neither straight inorganic chemistry nor obvious Earth-type biology. Moreover, *Viking*’s gas chromatograph-mass spectrometers failed to detect any evidence of organic, long-chain carbon molecules in the Martian soil, down to a level of one part per billion.

Most investigators eventually concluded that the Martian soil is lifeless. The surprising positive results from the biology experiments were attributed to superoxides in the soil, an excess of volatile oxygen molecules. The Martian soil, apparently, is something like powdered bleach.

Even though a few scientists still insist that their colleagues have interpreted *Viking*’s results much too conservatively, the consensus is that life does not—and cannot—exist on the surface of Mars.

On the other hand, researchers in Antarctica used a technique similar to *Viking*’s label release experiment to search for life in the near-freezing water of Lake Vostok, which is perpetually covered by 4 kilometers (2.48 miles) of ice. They not only got positive results, much as *Viking* did, but they also pulled living microorganisms out of the ice.

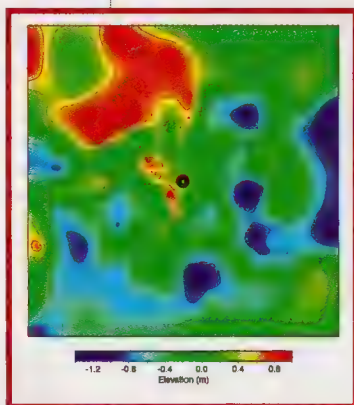
Has the scientific community written off the *Viking* results too soon? The answer may have to wait until scientists get to Mars.

Or perhaps not. Martians may have already come to Earth.

Visitors from Mars

Mars has sent visitors to Earth. Researchers have identified thirteen meteorites that originated on Mars and landed in Antarctica, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The largest such meteorite is named Zagami; it was discovered in Nigeria in 1962. It weighs 18 kilograms (39.6 pounds).

The “Martian 13” are known to be from Mars because the gases trapped within these rocks have the same ratios of noble gases (argon, neon, etc.) as the atmosphere of Mars. They were blasted off the surface of Mars by the impact of much larger



► WE WERE THERE. A topographic map of the Pathfinder landing site shows contours and color coding of elevations to a distance of sixty meters from the lander.

Cartographic processing by U.S. Geological Survey.

meteoroids, cruised through space for millennia, and eventually were caught by Earth's gravity field and crashed into our planet after a fiery plunge through our atmosphere.

In 1996 a team of NASA investigators announced finding possible fossils of ancient

tion of whether Earth life might have originated on Mars. Was our world "seeded" by inadvertent Martian space travelers?

Or could it have been the other way around? Considering the gravity fields of the two planets (and Mars's proximity to the asteroid belt), it

The Observatory

Soil vs. Regolith

If it turns out that the surface of Mars truly is barren of life, then it should be called "regolith," not "soil." "Soil" implies ground that contains living organisms, such as worms, beetles, grasses, and other plants. The surface of the Moon, utterly devoid of water and of life, is called by geologists a "regolith," from Greek roots meaning "blanket rock."

The possibility that Martian organisms could have survived a ride to Earth brings up the question of whether Earth life might have originated on Mars.

bacteria in one of the Martian meteorites, ALH84001, a 1.9 kilogram (4.18 pound) rock discovered in 1984 in the Allan Hills ice fields in eastern Antarctica.

Scientists have hotly debated the idea that the nanometer-scale structures found deep inside ALH84001 are the fossils of once-living Martian bacteria. Similar structures have been found in a few of the other Martian meteorites.

Lending credence to the idea of microscopic underground life, however, is the fact that geologists have discovered colonies of thermophilic (heat-loving) bacteria living in the intense heat and pressures deep below ground on Earth. These bacteria never see sunlight. They metabolize solid rock with water to produce the energy of life.

Up until these discoveries (the first of which came slightly more than five years ago), it was tacitly assumed that life needed sunlight to exist. After all, all life on Earth is dependent on photosynthetic organisms that convert solar energy into foodstuffs.

Well, not quite all life. Years earlier, oceanographers had been stunned by the discovery of whole colonies of deep-sea creatures that live around hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the ocean. Their food chain begins with bacteria that can metabolize the sulfur welling up from the hot springs.

Meanwhile, maverick astrophysicist Thomas Gold hypothesized that vast ecologies of subterranean bacteria exist far below the surface of the Earth—and other worlds, as well.

The discovery of thermophilic bacteria far below Earth's surface vindicated Gold's idea of a "deep, hot biosphere." It also meant that similar organisms might exist on Mars. For although the surface of Mars seems strongly inhospitable to life, deep underground there could be whole biospheres of thermophilic bacteria, just as there are on Earth.

The possibility that Martian organisms could have survived a ride to Earth brings up the ques-

tion of whether Earth life might have originated on Mars. Was our world "seeded" by inadvertent Martian space travelers?

Mars Yesterday

Planetary scientists believe that Mars was once much warmer and wetter than it is today. Spacecraft photos show sinuous trails that look like dried-out riverbeds. The 1998 *Pathfinder* lander photographed surface features that were most likely formed by rushing floodwaters. Many scientists believe much of the Martian landscape is underlaid by permafrost: frozen water reposing underground.

When Mars first coalesced out of the ring of dust and rubble around the newly formed Sun, more than four billion years ago, its interior was hot from the energy of uncountable impacts by objects ranging in size from dust grains to miniplanets, as well as heat generated by radioactive elements. As the surface of the planet cooled and solidified, Mars was sheathed in a much thicker atmosphere than it has today, and the surface was warm enough to contain liquid water.

Huge volcanoes belched titanic outflows of magma and steam. One of them, the aptly named Olympus Mons, is the tallest mountain in the solar system, three times higher than Mt. Everest. Its base is roughly the size of Iowa.

Mars was much more Earthlike at the outset. But because it is such a small planet—barely half Earth's size and with a surface gravity only one-third of Earth's—its atmosphere leaked away, together with its interior heat, until it became the cold, dry, barren world we see today.

Is it really barren, though?



▲ THIS AIN'T JELLYSTONE. Pictured above, "Yogi" is a meter-size rock about five meters northwest of the Mars *Pathfinder* lander and was the second rock visited by the *Sojourner* rover's alpha proton X-ray spectrometer instrument.

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Mars Tomorrow . . . and Beyond

In the coming decade, a dozen or more probes will be launched at Mars by NASA, Russian, European, and Japanese rockets. The exact number of Mars missions depends on political decisions, and is therefore not definite.

Some of the spacecraft will orbit Mars; others will land at various spots on Mars's surface; several will send samples of Martian soil, rock, and atmosphere back to eager scientists on Earth.

While plans are afoot to send probes that can dig into the Martian sands, none of the missions proposed so far will be capable of drilling deep enough—several kilometers, at least—to hit colonies of thermophilic bacteria. The probes might, however, detect permafrost ice beneath the surface of the ground; that would be a major encouragement to press on with the search for life.

Sooner or later, human explorers will go to Mars. This, too, depends largely on political decisions, although it is not beyond the realm of possibility to mount a human expedition through private funding, as I examined in my novel *Return to Mars*.

A key factor is the cost of such an expedition, which NASA pegged at roughly half a trillion dollars nearly ten years ago. However, innovative ideas such as Robert Zubrin's "Mars Direct" scheme could bring the cost down to the point where a few private philanthropists of the Gates and Spielberg caliber might be able to fund an expedition.

Zubrin's "Mars Direct" idea is simply this: Live off the land. Instead of bringing every molecule of fuel, air, and food that an expedition would need, send automated machinery that can produce fuel and breathable air and food crops out of the local Martian resources. Once these precursors have landed on Mars and produced the materials the human explorers need, then send the human team.

It could be done, with only a modest advance on existing technology, for a fraction of NASA's price tag.

Mars for the Martians— and a Few Good Earthlings

The continuing search for life in the universe will send human explorers to Mars, possibly within the next fifteen to twenty years.

Unless they find that Mars is totally barren, the red planet should be off limits to colonization. Mars is a unique world

and should be kept as unspoiled as possible. Talk of terraforming and colonization is not only premature, it's silly.

Why colonize Mars or any other planet? What economic motive would fund such a venture? And terraforming? A fantasy from science fiction's childhood past. The costs, the risks, the sheer time it would take to transform a planet into an Earthlike world simply beggars the imagination.

Do we need more real estate off Earth? Then build O'Neill-type habitats. In 1976, Princeton Professor Gerard K. O'Neill proposed constructing habitats the size of Manhattan Island at the L-5 position along the Moon's orbit. They would be cheaper and easier to build than terraforming alien worlds, and could provide a completely Earthlike environment.

Who should go to Mars? Scientists, of course. And you and I. But when you and I go, it should be through virtual reality visits.

We can walk on the red sands of Mars, climb the solar system's tallest mountain, gasp with awe at the titanic Valles Marineris—a chasm that makes our Grand Canyon look petite. And we can do it all without leaving our living rooms, through virtual reality.

Mars waits for us, beckoning. We should not ruin it, the way we have inadvertently ruined so much of nature here on Earth.

Take nothing but pictures; leave nothing but footprints. With VR we can enjoy Mars, revel in its strange harsh beauty—and not even leave footprints to mar its rust-red sands. 🚀



about the author

Author of more than ninety futuristic novels and nonfiction books, Dr. Ben Bova became involved in

the space program two years before the creation of NASA. He lectures on topics ranging from the craft of writing fiction to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

In his various writings, Dr. Bova has predicted the Space Race of the 1960s, solar power satellites, electronic books, the discovery of organic chemicals in interstellar space, virtual reality, video games, the Strategic Defense Initiative, international peacekeeping forces, and sex in zero gravity. He is President Emeritus of the National Space Society and a past president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Among his books, Ben Bova is the author of Mars (Bantam, 1992) and Return to Mars (Avon, 1999).

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Take Me To Your Leader

Exploring the Fine Art of Diplomacy

THERE'S NO DENYING that military SF has been among the genre's most popular categories of late. Between the futuristic space navies of David Weber and Elizabeth Moon, the alternate-history wars described by Harry Turtledove and David Drake, and the enduring popularity of novels set in the *Battletech* and *Wing Commander* game worlds, science fiction writers have postulated enough mayhem in the last few years to keep defense contractors occupied well into the next millennium.

But while brute force may be the simplest approach to resolving a conflict, it's not necessarily the best or most interesting answer. So it's intriguing to find not one but three books in the stack of recent arrivals in which diplomacy, not heavy weapons fire, is the central focus.

Precursor

C. J. Cherryh
DAW (hc, 438 pp.)
0-88677-836-0 \$23.95

Even if the jacket didn't bill *Precursor* as a follow-up to a prior trilogy, it would be difficult for newcomers (myself among them) not to realize that they've arrived in mid-saga. The situation in which reluctant human diplomat Bren Cameron finds himself is just too complex, and his relationships with many of those around him are full of baggage acquired prior to the novel's opening.

We don't see, for example, how Bren became *paidbi*—the rough equivalent of an ambassador—to the leader of the alien *atevi*, representing their interests in dealings with humanity. We see only the fallout from a past romance of Bren's, and none of the foundation for a current one. And the outcome of Bren's current assignment depends almost entirely on a key friendship with a character who is missing and unreachable for nearly three-fourths of the book.

Yet despite the immense amount of backstory, Cherryh manages to keep matters moving briskly and provides context so that readers won't get lost. On the downside, this means that we see very little of *atevi* culture and society, as most of the action takes place on an orbital habitat populated mostly (if thinly) by humans. Also kept offstage is the lingering threat of attack by an alien race of unknown origin—an attack from which the human starship *Phoenix* has retreated, arriving at the *atevi* star system.

◀ BEYOND THE BACKSTORY.

Precursor, by C. J. Cherryh, is a suspenseful and skillfully told tale that will leave fans well pleased.

JACKET ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN YOULL



At the same time, Cherryh maintains considerable tension and suspense by limiting her focus to Bren himself. Readers know only what he knows and see only what he sees, and can therefore empathize with Bren's immense frustration at having just barely enough information to make decisions. Cherryh resists the modern fashion of sprinkling her story with secondary viewpoints, and the approach is both refreshing and highly effective.

Those who seek out Cherryh's books for their sharply detailed aliens may find *Pre-cursor* disappointing; they may be better served by starting with *Foreigner* and its sequels. But those who seek out Cherryh for skillful and suspenseful storytelling will come away from the present novel well pleased and can look forward to at least two more books in the series.

The Lives of Dax

Marco Palmieri (ed.)
Pocket (tp, 367 pp.)
0-671-02840-5 \$14.00

If we define a diplomat as one whose purpose is to bring mutual understanding to individuals or groups of different origins, then *Star Trek's* "Dax" qualifies nine times over. The alien Trill are one of the franchise's most distinctive inventions: two sharply divergent species whose fusion produces a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Now editor Marco Palmieri has assembled an unusual anthology in which Dax's history is recounted in individual tales featuring each of the wormlike symbiont's humanoid host personalities. And though the approach may seem obvious given Dax's serial nature, the results are remarkably effective and not at all what one might expect

of a *Star Trek* volume.

Of the nine novelettes that make up the book, the most startling is perhaps "Allegro Oubouros in D Minor," in which S. D. Perry and Robert Simpson flesh out the life of Joran Dax, whose musical skills are the counterpoint to a series of expertly crafted killings. Perry and Simpson

introduced, but addresses them with rather more respect and wit than we saw in the televised script.

Of the remaining four tales, the most intriguing comes from comics writer Jeffrey Lang. Billed as his first prose fiction publication, "Dead Man's Hand" is a perceptive and suspenseful deep-space

Editor Marco Palmieri gets the highest marks for assembling a cadre of solid science fiction tales that work well on their own merits.

don't pull punches, and the degree of psychological complexity they bring to Joran's character is unsettlingly high. "Sins of the Mother," from Perry writing alone, is almost as intense if not quite as dark. Perry's solo effort concerns scientist Audrid Dax and a mystery surrounding the death of Audrid's husband—both symbiont and host—during a space mission.

Several stories turn on matters of diplomacy or political intrigue, all to good effect. Steven Barnes's "The Music Between the Notes" introduces Curzon Dax and Benjamin Sisko to some of the strangest aliens in the *Star Trek* universe, while Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "First Steps" shows that even in her first lifetime, Lela Dax was not without solid leadership instincts. There are also diplomatic lessons—and more personal ones—in the mostly lighthearted "Old Souls," in which a youthful Leonard McCoy crosses paths with remarkably attractive gymnast Emony Dax, who isn't quite as young as she looks. Michael Jan Friedman's story raises some of the same issues posed in the TV episode in which the Trill species was

adventure involving shy scientist Tobin Dax, a Vulcan colleague, and a small starship commandeered by Romulan forces. Lang's entry compares favorably with stories from veteran *Star Trek* writers L. A. Graf and Susan Wright, as well as with the framing narrative provided by Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens.

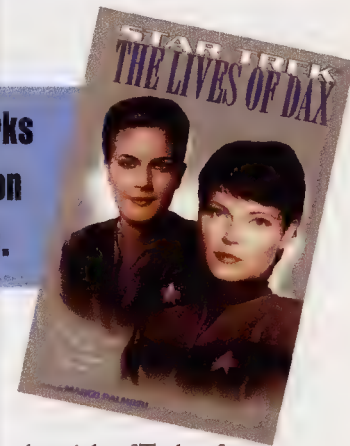
Fans of the *Deep Space Nine* television series should be pleased with the volume, and fans of *Star Trek* in general will appreciate the careful interweaving of Trill history with that of Starfleet. But Marco Palmieri gets the highest marks for assembling a cadre of solid science fiction tales that work well on their own merits. *The Lives of Dax* is easily one of 1999's better SF anthologies, and one of the year's least predictable.

The Arrival

Fred Saberhagen
Tor (hc, 315 pp.)
0-312-87302-6 \$23.95

It's distinctly possible that regular viewers of Gene Roddenberry's *Earth: Final Conflict* will find Fred Saberhagen's literary prequel to the syndicated TV series more satisfying than I did. I've seen

just enough of the show to grasp the premise: that the alien Taelons, recently arrived on 21st-century Earth bearing promises of technological wonders and spiritual growth, are neither as benign nor as all-knowing as they claim. Unfortunately, Saberhagen's



chronicle of Taelon foe and former confidant Jonathan Doors does little more than restate this conflict, providing numerous hints at explanations but following up on almost none.

A major part of the problem is that billionaire Jonathan Doors is at best a guest player in his own origin story. If we're to believe the jacket copy, *The Arrival* is the tale of Jonathan's transition from key liaison between the Taelon and human cultures to secretive fighter for humanity's liberation from Taelon influence. But the starring role actually belongs to Jonathan's father Jubal, who at age sixteen is accidentally drawn into a conflict between a lone Taelon agent and a strange, mostly dormant being called a Urod, which has been masquerading as a piece of ancient Egyptian statuary.

Jubal's adventures are set largely in and around California's Hearst Castle in 1936, and Saberhagen relates the San Simeon episodes with a convincing degree of casual

detail, bespeaking either copious research or utter invention. Unfortunately, once Jubal and teenaged torch singer Esther Summer-son are shanghaied onto a Taelon spacecraft, detail gives way to numbing vagueness. Neither the injured Taelon pilot nor the Urod, who communicates only in nonverbal mind-emanations, conveys much in the way of useful information. What's more, Jubal is the only being on the ship capable of independent action: The Taelon is injured and only partly lucid, the unspeaking Urod projects an aura of psychic menace that makes London's famous pea-soup fogs seem transparent, and Esther spends the whole space voyage in a coma.

The entire flashback occupies just under half the novel, yet it fails to provide any dramatic payoff. No sooner have readers become absorbed in Jubal's story than Saberhagen abandons him, focusing the narrative back onto Jonathan. Yet Jonathan neither grows

modern-day diplomatic intrigues are narrated smoothly enough, the long sidetrack into the past makes Jonathan's change of heart seem rushed and prompted more by external forces than by increased maturity on Jonathan's part.

What's frustrating about all this is that the mysteries are actually fairly intriguing. Saberhagen shows us a huge space station, largely deserted and badly scarred by weapons fire; it's natural to wonder what the battle was about and who won. The Urod is at once eerily menacing and dangerously fascinating; clearly it's immeasurably dangerous, but it may also be humanity's best possible ally against the Taelons' mysterious plans. Yet we get no chance at answers, neither in Jubal's era nor Jonathan's.

Some of this may be a direct consequence of the novel's prequel status in relation to its parent continuity; for instance, if the Urod are one of the TV series' ongoing enigmas, it's clearly not Saberhagen's prerogative to explain them here. But the

promises. (There's a certain irony in that, I suppose. Perhaps the novels are a Taelon plot. . . .)

One of the hallmarks of intriguing aliens—like Cherryh's *atevi* and the Roddenberry-inspired Taelons—is that they're, well, alien, and therefore difficult for humans to understand. By this logic, it ought to be easier to deal with intelligent computers, since those at least are (or will be) the product of human creation. And then again, maybe not. Two sharply divergent takes on artificial intelligence recently landed on my desk, and both suggest that sentient computers are likely to be far more complex than we expect.

The Veiled Web

Catherine Asaro
Bantam (pb, 355 pp.)
0-553-58151-1 \$5.99

If not for one glaring anomaly, one might reasonably accuse Catherine Asaro's 21st century portrayal in *The Veiled Web* of being down-

forgivably optimistic lapse, Asaro hits the mark in all categories, creating a complex labyrinth of intrigue that weaves its way among three sharply divergent yet overlapping worlds.

One of these is the world of Lucia del Mar, an internationally recognized ballerina whose performances can command favorable attention even from heads of state. Another is the exotic land of Morocco, home to the wealthy and enigmatic Rashid al-Jazari, whose career in high finance has largely overshadowed his reputation as a brilliant scientific researcher. And the third is the intangible web of data and energy that makes up the Internet, colloquially called cyberspace, where all realities converge in a single infinitely stranded braid as intricate as Celtic knotwork.

It isn't surprising when Lucia and Rashid cross paths, first at the White House and later in Italy. But their quiet Italian meeting is disrupted when the duo is abducted, and although they are only briefly in captivity, the circumstances of the ensuing rescue conspire to strand Lucia at Rashid's ancient family home in Morocco—as his bride. Only at this point does Asaro's credibility waver seri-

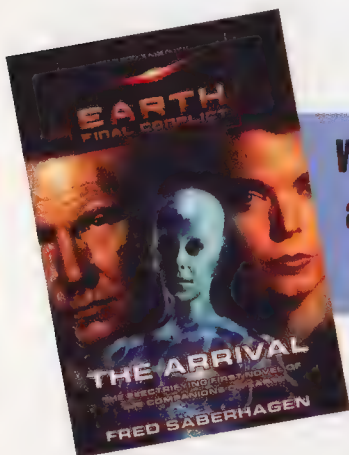
ously; the finessed marriage requires her to briefly ignore Lucia's celebrity status as well as suspending her protagonist's normal good judgment.

But once the hurdle has been crossed, the novel progresses crisply and plausibly. It turns out that Rashid's scientific genius is in computer programming—specifically, in AI development. His prior

What's frustrating about all this is that the mysteries are actually fairly intriguing. Yet we get no chance at answers, neither in Jubal's era nor Jonathan's.

letter accompanying the advance copy of the book specifically says that Saberhagen "was not bound by terribly tight strictures," and that Tor's charter from the *Earth: Final Conflict* television folks is "to have fun with these novels." But however well-intentioned the effort, this first of three announced tie-ins delivers far less than it

right prescient. Contrary to Asaro's optimistic forecast, the Genie computer network's SFRT, or Science Fiction RoundTable, folded its virtual tent at the end of 1999, thereby disbanding one of the liveliest and most formidable science fiction communities in online history. [Insert moment of silence here.] Apart from this one



nor changes as a result of hearing his father's tale—he's merely provided with a modest amount of backstory and a clutter of mysteries for which no answers are available, at least not within the novel itself. And while the

Take Me To Your Leader

accomplishments include a sleek voice-interactive Web browser; its projected successor is a full-fledged synthetic intellect. And although this last is supposedly a closely-guarded secret, access to the AI technology and a related nanotech encounter suit is what Rashid's enemies will brave any risk to obtain.

Asaro is staking out unusual territory with *The Veiled Web*. On one level, the novel works as a sharply conventional category romance, to an extent that SF readers may find unsettling and even stilted. As smoothly as the relationship between Lucia and Rashid is drawn, it's formulaic nonetheless, and there's no real way Asaro can get around this. However, the science-fictional aspects of the plot are cast with believable precision, and Asaro's predictions of near-future Internet evolution are both credible and downright frightening at times. What's more, Asaro populates the al-Jazari household with a host of convincing and three-dimensional secondary characters who provide an engaging distraction from the necessarily predictable romantic plotline.

Whether the novel can successfully cross-market itself remains to be seen. Asaro's writing is clear enough that most of the romance-reading audience should have little trouble absorbing the SF components of the story, but the class of SF readers that usually gravitates to high-end technological speculation may be put off by her overt nods to the romance genre. One can (and should) hope

otherwise; good storytelling ought to be rewarded regardless of its genre tags, and *The Veiled Web* is nothing if not a well-told story.

Candle

John Barnes
Tor (hc, 240 pp.)
0-312-89077-X \$22.95

There's more to a really satisfying SF novel than a clever science-fictional idea. The very best writers are those who can think through a concept, work out a set of logical consequences, and wrap a

One True meme, which has set humankind to rebuilding a world left badly damaged in the wake of two decades of warfare. Most of Earth's population is under One True's direct and mostly benign influence via a subprogram called Resuna. But a small handful of renegades, or cowboys, remains in hiding, dodging "infection" by Resuna and One True and living as best they can in the wild. It's Currie's occasional job to catch these cowboys and bring them into One True's fold.

The concept behind *Candle* is that of memes—the mutant offspring of present-day computer viruses and next-generation artificial intelligence.

briskly paced plot around the path from idea to fully-developed execution. John Barnes is in that group, and *Candle* is yet another demonstration of his ability to develop convincing futures.

The concept behind *Candle* is that of memes—the mutant offspring of present-day computer viruses and next-generation artificial intelligence, with the added twist that they can jump from traditional computer hardware into the human brain and back again. Seed humanity with several dozen competing memes, and you have a recipe for a weird cross between traditional war and new-wave epidemic as a single overriding meme emerges from the conflict and puts itself in charge of worldly affairs.

As the novel opens, all this is recent history. Currie Curran is a veteran of the Meme Wars and a "cowboy hunter" in the service of the

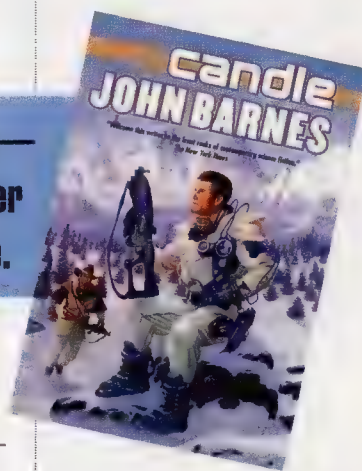
So far this sounds straightforward enough, maybe even familiar from certain corners of the cyberpunk subgenre. But Barnes has several tricks up his sleeve as Currie heads into the Rockies in search of legendary cowboy Dave Singleton, a.k.a. Lobo. Revealing the specific twists would ruin the suspense, but suffice it to say that while One True is genuinely intelligent—unlike the average *Star Trek* computer-deity—it's also constrained by its original design parameters. The final resolution, therefore, isn't pulled completely out of left field, but Barnes manages to finesse several first-rate surprises along the way.

It's interesting to note that Barnes's speculations run on a track not far removed from some of those in *The Veiled Web*. Though the tone of the

Scientifiction

books differs sharply, the two futures are broadly compatible; Asaro's AI software and nanotech gadgetry might plausibly be counted as precursors to Barnes's memes. The two authors' musings thus act to reinforce each other, to the benefit of both novels.

Ultimately, *Candle* is probably the stronger SF yarn, though it's also shorter and more focused on result than on process. The novels



have different virtues; Asaro is more skilled at engaging readers' emotions, but Barnes has a narrow edge in engaging their intellects. Each will appeal to a sizable audience—and members of both camps would be well-advised to keep their antivirus software up to date. 🐱

About the author



John C. Bunnell has been reviewing SF and fantasy professionally since 1984; so far, the artificial intelligence that lives in his computer has been content to keep its opinions to itself.

Material to be considered for review in this space may be forwarded to him at 6663 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Hwy., PMB 326, Portland, OR 97225-1403.

*A medical crisis and a mystery
force the Enterprise crew to combine
their talents as never before.*

Bedside MATTERS

BY GREG COX

“DAMMIT, I’m a doctor, not a veterinarian!”

Beverly Crusher sighed and rolled her eyes, none too surprised by the familiar grousing of the *Enterprise*’s Emergency Medical Hologram. This wasn’t the first time the EMH had gotten on her nerves; for an artificial lifeform, the holographic doctor had a markedly abrasive personality, not to mention a highly questionable bedside manner.

I’d just as soon not use the darn thing at all, she thought, except in the most extreme emergencies, but Starfleet Medical keeps pestering me for evaluation reports on this wonderful new technological innovation.

Ironically, it was Crusher herself who had approved the initial funding and development of the EMH project, back during her yearlong stint as head of Starfleet Medical. *It seemed like a good idea at the time, she reflected wryly.*

Right now, however, the hologram was a mass of fuming photons, characteristically indignant at the simple task for which Crusher had activated him. “I’m programmed with over five million possible treatments,” the EMH protested, his arms crossed atop his chest as he confronted Beverly in sickbay, “along with the accumulated knowledge and diagnostic capabilities of two thousand medical references, forty-seven physicians, and over three thousand humanoid cultures, and to what crucial medical challenge is the sum total of this awesome amount of expertise applied to? Soothing the digestive tract of an overfed feline!”

“I do not wish to contradict you, Doctor,” Lt. Commander Data stated calmly, his synthetic arms holding the feline in question, “but I do not believe that I have fed Spot excessively.” The gold-skinned android had arrived in sickbay only minutes before, bearing his afflicted pet. “Nevertheless, she has been gagging repeatedly for a period of 12.637 hours, which leads me to suspect the presence of a singularly stubborn *trichobezoar*.”

“In other words, a hairball!” The EMH shook his balding head in disbelief. Ignoring the concerned android and his pet, he addressed Crusher petulantly. “Don’t tell me you seriously intend to waste my considerable talents on a chore unworthy of even the most inexperienced orderly.”

Do you think I’d inflict your winning personality on a sentient patient? the ship’s chief medical officer asked silently. The fact that Reginald Barclay had played a significant part in the creation of the EMH didn’t do anything to increase Beverly’s confidence in the program.

“This is my sickbay,” she reminded the hologram, asserting her authority, “and you’ll treat whomever or whatever I assign you to.” The tone of her voice made it clear that the discussion was over. “Mr. Data, hand over the patient.”

With obvious care, the android passed the large orange tabby to the EMH, who grudgingly accepted his new charge. Spot, perhaps made cranky by her abdominal distress, was less than pleased by the transfer; hissing loudly, she snapped at the hologram’s wrists with bared fangs, lashing out with her claws at the same time.

For a second it looked like the EMH was going to get bit, but the hologram evaded the tabby’s jaws and paws by rendering the endangered portions of his anatomy momentarily intangible, so that the irate cat’s attacks passed right through him. Holding Spot at arm’s length, a disdainful expression on his face, the EMH carried the squirming feline over to the nearest biobed, then held the cat down on the sterile surface of the bed while its built-in diagnostic scanners examined Spot from the inside out. The whole time, the tabby struggled to escape the hologram’s grip, alternating angry hisses with outraged yowls.

“You can keep your undoubtedly septic claws and teeth to yourself,” the EMH sternly scolded his thrashing patient. “My program is more than a match for any presentient pussycat.” He sighed and shook his head wearily. “Next they’ll have me flossing the bicuspid of a Denebian slime devil!”

To distract Data from his pet’s anxiety, and to better ignore the EMH’s disaffected muttering, Beverly decided to initiate a little small talk. “So, how are our distinguished passengers faring?” she asked Data.

The *Enterprise* was currently transporting a shipload of alien ambassadors to a vital diplomatic conference on Penthara IV. Crusher suspected that Captain Picard had his hands full coping



ILLUSTRATION BY CLIFF NIELSEN



with the overinflated egos and fractious personalities of the quarreling delegates—a diagnosis that Data rapidly confirmed. “Our guests seem to be unusually . . . demanding,” the android stated with admirable diplomacy. “They place an extraordinary amount of importance on their own preferences, to the exclusion of the concerns of their fellow ambassadors.”

“I can imagine,” Beverly said in a sympathetic tone. “Trying to get politicians to agree on anything, even the menu for a banquet, can be like herding cats.”

On the biobed, a few meters away, Spot perked up her ears at Crusher’s remark, only to quickly lose interest in the conversation as it became apparent that Beverly wasn’t going to use the

C-word again anytime soon. She tried once more to bite the EMH, with more success this time. “Ouch!” the hologram yelped, his attention painfully yanked away from the diagnostic monitor above the bed. “That smarts!”

Good thing holograms don’t need tetanus shots, Beverly thought, more amused than she probably ought to be by the EMH’s stormy relationship with his patient. The sudden beep of her combadge, however, drove all thought of the EMH’s predicament from her mind. “Crusher here,” she said, tapping the gold duranium badge. “What is it?”

The voice of Captain Jean-Luc Picard came through the badge. “We have a medical emergency, Doctor. The Chelon

ambassador has collapsed without warning. He is being beamed directly to sickbay."

"Understood," Crusher acknowledged. "We'll be ready."

Or as ready as we can be, she thought grimly. The Federation had only recently made contact with the Chelonae, so Beverly knew there was not a lot of information about this particular species in the Starfleet database. Nevertheless, she had made of a point of familiarizing herself with the medical profiles of all the various alien species aboard (in fact, that's just what she'd been doing before Data showed up with Spot), so she was not at all surprised when a large humanoid turtle immediately materialized upon the primary biobed.

The golden sparkle of the transporter effect faded quickly, exposing a mottled, greenish-brown shell about the size of an adult Horta. Unfortunately, Crusher noted at once, the stricken Chelon had drawn his head and other extremities into his shell, leaving her little to examine except a dense, opaque carapace. *Thank goodness I don't need to rely on my eyes alone*, she thought, grateful for the state-of-the-art medical technology at her disposal.

"Alyssa!" she called out. Nurse Ogawa came running in from the adjacent medlab, where she had been performing tests on some experimental antibiotics. Since the unconscious ambassador would clearly not fit within the standard surgical support frame, Crusher was forced to rely on the overhead cluster of biofunction sensors; she also immediately activated a sterilization field around the biobed and its inaccessible occupant.

"Don't forget, I'm more than ready to assist you," the EMH volunteered, still contending with the uncooperative cat. Orange fur bristled all along Spot's back. "My program is fully equipped to deal with all manner of exoskeletons."

Beverly paid little attention to the hologram. She had more important things to concentrate on; the Chelon's vital signs were weak and fading steadily. She studied the diagnostic monitor, noting signs of severe cardiac distress. "Prepare for immediate surgery," she instructed Ogawa.

"Yes, Doctor," the nurse answered, hurrying to fetch a tray of gleaming exoscalds, autosutures, and trilaser connectors. "You know," she commented upon her return, "in Japanese mythology, the turtle represents longevity and good luck."

"Let's hope that counts for something," Crusher said, frowning. They would have to work quickly to keep the ambassador alive.

The sickbay doors whished open, and Captain Picard marched briskly into the intensive-care ward, accompanied by another Chelon dignitary. The humanoid tortoise stood upright on his hind legs while his scaly, gray head poked out from the bony armor covering his torso. Aside from a copper medallion hanging from his squat, wattled neck, the Chelon wore no adornment; Beverly guessed that the terrapin's all-concealing shell made further garments unnecessary.

The captain hastily introduced the new arrival. "This is Secretary Skute, the ambassador's personal assistant."

"Is Ambassador Nanimult still alive?" the other Chelon croaked excitedly, pushing past Beverly to invade the sterilized

area around his superior. "What are you doing to him?"

"Nothing yet," Crusher assured him. She tried to escort the agitated envoy away from the biobed, but Skute refused to budge. "But the ambassador's heart has undergone a serious rupture. He's hemorrhaging internally, which means I have to operate immediately to save his life."

"A rupture?" Skute's lower beak moved up and down rapidly. Glossy black eyes widened in surprise. "I don't understand. What could have caused this?"

"I'm not sure," Crusher told him. "That's going to take further investigation. First, though, we need to repair his heart as soon as possible."

"Make it so," Picard said. He placed his hand on the upper ridge of Skute's shell and politely but firmly indicated that the secretary should step back from the surgical area. "Ambassador Nanimult is in excellent

hands," he promised the other Chelon.

But Skute appeared even more anxious than before. "Wait! Stop!" he squawked loudly, shrugging his shell out from beneath Picard's hand. Webbed hands gesticulated fussily. "You can't do this!"

Beverly didn't understand. Neither, judging from his puzzled expression, did the captain. "There's no choice," she explained. "I have to operate."

"No!" Skute insisted. "You don't understand. We are a very private people. It is strictly forbidden to allow one's shell to be opened in the presence of outsiders." Webbed fingers brushed his own shell protectively. "No offense intended, of course."

Beverly couldn't believe what she was hearing. "There's no way I can operate on the ambassador's heart without cutting through his shell somehow. We can't just stand by and let him die!"

"Ambassador Nanimult is a man of deep personal convictions," Skute stated flatly. "He would never violate our people's sacred customs and beliefs."

Picard attempted to reason with the Chelon envoy. "I respect your traditions, Secretary, but surely there must be some flexibility here. What is more important in this instance—propriety, or the ambassador's very survival?"

Skute shook his head vehemently. "With regret, Captain, I cannot possibly give your doctor permission to open Ambassador Nanimult's shell. You simply must save him without an invasive operation. Surely your Federation medical science has another solution?"

"But if this taboo is so important," Crusher protested, frustrated by the assistant's intransigence, "then why wasn't the ambassador traveling with a Chelon doctor, in case of emergency?" The nearest Chelon surgeon, she was all too aware, was hundreds of light-years away.

Skute sighed theatrically. "To be quite honest, Ambassador Nanimult was supposed to have been accompanied by his personal physician, but the doctor herself fell ill at the last minute, and there was no time to secure a replacement." His stubby tail twitched in a somewhat sheepish fashion. "The ambassador, who is a very . . . strong-willed . . . individual, has little patience with doctors at the best of times. He categorically refused to

"There's
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ambassador's
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his shell."

delay his departure until a new physician could be recruited, especially since he had just passed a routine check-up only a week before. That's just the way he is," Skute added apologetically.

Picard nodded soberly, prompting Beverly to guess that the captain could personally testify to the ambassador's "strong will" and stubbornness. "Jean-Luc," she beseeched him, "you have to let me save him."

"Blood pressure dropping to critical levels," Ogawa called out, adding urgency to Crusher's plea, as if any more were needed. They couldn't even set up a plasma I.V. without probing beneath Nanimult's shell.

Picard did not answer Crusher immediately. Scowling, he fixed a probing gaze on Secretary Skute, who stared back at the captain as adamantly and implacably as a Vulcan logician. Despite her overriding concern for her patient, Beverly couldn't help sympathizing with the captain's position; with so little known about the Chelonae and their beliefs, Picard had little choice but to accept Skute's pronouncements on Chelon culture.

Now it looked as though Nanimult's own obstinate nature, coupled with the Chelonae's strict sense of privacy, might cost the ambassador his life. Crusher had seldom felt so frustrated.

I know I can save him, she thought desperately, if I can just get the chance!

"Excuse me," the EMH interrupted, "but I may have a solution to this particular dilemma."

Beverly looked at the hologram in surprise. What with the crisis over the hemorrhaging ambassador, she had forgotten about the EMH and his veterinary duties. Her first impulse was to simply deactivate him—coping with that exasperating prima donna of a program was absolutely the last thing she needed right now—but she hesitated before voicing the necessary command. *It couldn't hurt to hear him out, she realized;* at this point, she was willing to listen to anyone who might know how to get around Secretary Skute's prohibitions.

Even an unusually obnoxious hologram.

"Well?" she prompted the EMH. "Go ahead."

The holographic doctor was momentarily taken aback by Crusher's invitation to speak, but he quickly recovered and launched into his proposed remedy. "By selectively turning my hands and instruments solid or intangible as needed, I should be able to operate on the ambassador's heart *through* the patient's shell, guided by the image on a medical monitor. That way, no primitive tribal taboos get violated; it's like the difference between a noninvasive scan for weapons and a strip search."

Picard's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "Yes," he said. "That could work." He eyed Skute confidently. "I can't imagine there are any centuries-old Chelon injunctions against X-rays and such; otherwise you would have already objected to our diagnostic sensors. Isn't that so, Secretary?"

Skute's wide black eyes zeroed in on the furry orange feline in the EMH's care, and his voice ascended to a new level of indignation: "I don't believe this. You seriously expect me to entrust Ambassador Nanimult's life to the ship's veterinarian?"

"I am not a veterinarian!" the EMH protested a bit too loudly, lifting Spot from the biobed and thrusting her gracefully into Data's waiting arms. "I'll have you know, Mr. Secretary, that I am programmed with over five million possible treatments, two thousand medical references, forty-seven—"

"Our advanced Emergency Medical Hologram is completely reliable," Crusher asserted, cutting off the EMH's long-winded recitation of his attributes. *I can't believe I just said that, she thought.* "And he is a machine-generated phenomenon, just as X-rays are, so you should have no objection to using him to help the ambassador."

"I see, I mean, I don't know—" Skute waffled, his self-important manner proving no match against the combined resolve of the captain, Crusher, and the EMH. "I suppose it might be acceptable, but I'm not sure . . ."

Picard had heard all he needed to hear. "Get to work, Doctor," he instructed the EMH.

WHILE THE HOLOGRAM raced against time to save Ambassador Nanimult, his intangible hands passing through the dense horn of the Chelon diplomat's shell, Beverly continued to study the sensor readings charting Nanimult's condition.

What she discovered disturbed her.

"Captain, if I may have a word with you in private?" She gestured toward her office at the opposite end of the ward. Her calm expression and level tone offered no clue as to what concerned her. "Data, why don't you join us?"

Leaving Nurse Ogawa to assist the EMH, she guided Picard and Data into her roomy office, then waited for the door to close automatically behind them before delivering the shocking news: "Captain, the ambassador has been poisoned."

"*Mon dieu,*" the captain whispered. "Are you quite certain, Doctor?"

Crusher nodded. "I checked the primary sensor readings against my medical tricorder and came to the same conclusion both times. Judging from the results, I'd guess that the toxin was administered, probably via a hypospray, sometime in the last six hours."

Picard's frown deepened. "Unfortunately, Ambassador Nanimult was attending a crowded reception in the ship's lounge when he was stricken; in the crush, any one of the ship's passengers could have poisoned him covertly. There are dozens of potential suspects."

"He could also have been poisoned in his own quarters, shortly before the reception," Crusher pointed out, "or en route to that same function."

Picard nodded. "In light of your discovery, Doctor, the sudden illness of the ambassador's physician, back on the Chelon homeworld, now looks extremely suspicious, not to mention convenient. I suspect a conspiracy at work."

"Fascinating," Data observed, stroking Spot as he spoke. Beverly knew that the android enjoyed solving mysteries in the holodeck, often in the guise of Sherlock Holmes. "May I ask, Captain, if a hypospray was found at the site of the reception?"

You seriously expect me to entrust Ambassador Nanimult's life to the ship's veterinarian?



"Not that I know of," Picard answered. "But I'll see to it that the lounge is immediately searched." He paused to consider what else might be done. "Inspecting the other ambassadors, their staffs, and their quarters will be a trickier proposition; the confidentiality of their persons and belongings is protected by diplomatic custom."

"Perhaps that will not be necessary," Data proposed. Cradled in the android's arms, Spot purred contentedly. "Chances are, the assassin will have wanted to dispose of the murder weapon as swiftly and efficiently as possible, and how better to do so than by dematerializing the hypospray in any one of the *Enterprise's* many convenient replicator units?"

That sounds logical enough, Beverly thought.

The captain seemed intrigued. "Go on," he urged Data.

"What the assassin may not realize," Data stated, "is that the molecular patterns of all dematerialized refuse are held in the system's memory buffers for exactly 24.001 hours, on the off chance that someone accidentally disposes of something valuable, as has been occasionally known to happen."

"That's right," Beverly said. "I recovered my wedding ring that way once, after it slipped off my finger and got stuck in a surgical glove that I recycled before I knew what had happened." She vividly recalled her initial panic when she had first realized that the ring was missing. "Thank goodness the replicator was able to reproduce it perfectly."

Data approached Crusher's uncluttered desk. "May I use your terminal, Doctor?" Beverly stepped aside to let him pass, and Data seated himself before the doctor's primary workstation. Perhaps realizing that the android was going to be too busy to pet her anymore, Spot scooted off his lap and onto the floor, where she began nosing around the office. Data's fingers danced over the lighted control panel in a blur of superhuman speed. "I am instructing the computer to search its memory for anything resembling a hypospray that might have been disintegrated in a replicator in the last six hours."

Beverly held her breath expectantly, but the results of Data's search were not long in coming. An electronic chime announced that the ship's computer had completed its task. "My hypothesis was correct," Data reported promptly. "Computer records confirm that just such an operation occurred approximately 31.623 minutes before the start of the diplomatic reception."

"Commendable work, Mr. Data," Picard said. The captain leaned forward, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. "Can the computer pinpoint the specific replicator unit used to destroy the weapon?"

"Affirmative, sir," Data revealed. "In fact, the replicator in question turns out to be located in the private quarters of"—Data raised an artificial eyebrow, presumably for dramatic effect—"Secretary Skute."

"Skute!" Crusher exclaimed. *No wonder that treacherous ter-rapin didn't want me to operate on Ambassador Nanimult...*

"Indeed," Data continued, rising from the doctor's chair. "I theorize that Skute poisoned the ambassador shortly before the

reception, then covertly disposed of the incriminating hypospray in his own quarters, which happen to be adjacent to those of Ambassador Nanimult."

The captain tapped his combadge. "Picard here. Security to sickbay, on the double." A stern, unforgiving expression came over his dignified features. "Now then, let's go see to the ambassador's oh-so-solicitous subordinate."

Beverly and Data followed Picard back to the intensive-care ward, where they found Skute fidgeting at the fringes of the surgical area. Two imposing assistant nurses, no doubt drafted by Ogawa, flanked the secretary, keeping him more or less out of the way of the EMH and Nurse Ogawa as they labored to repair the damage to the ambassador's heart. Crusher glanced quickly at the monitor above the biobed and was relieved to see that Nanimult's life signs were weak but stable. An infusion of an all-purpose plasma substitute was helping to raise the patient's blood pressure. *I think I may have underestimated the EMH's talents,* she admitted privately, *even if his personality still leaves something to be desired.*

"Please step away from the ambassador, Secretary," Picard ordered in his most authoritative tone, even as a steel door slid open to admit a team of security officers in red-and-black uniforms, each one with a hand on the phaser at his or her hip.

Skute blinked in alarm. Beverly could tell that the would-be assassin knew his guilt had been exposed. His left arm retracted into his shell, and Crusher half expected the rest of his extremities to follow; instead, the skittish forelimb suddenly reemerged, gripping a lethal-looking disruptor pistol, which Beverly assumed came from some form of inner pouch. "Stay back!" Skute squawked, brandishing his weapon wildly. "I'll kill you all if I have to!"

His holographic hands still deeply immersed in the unconscious ambassador, the EMH looked up in annoyance. "If you don't mind," he objected, sounding distinctly vexed by the confrontation brewing in sickbay, "I'm performing a very complicated surgical procedure here, so I'd appreciate a little less commotion."

Although somewhat lacking in perspective, the EMH had a point, Beverly realized; an intensive-care ward was no place for a shoot-out. Captain Picard understood that, too. "Everyone keep back," he instructed all present, gesturing for the assistant nurses to distance themselves from the desperate Skute. "Listen to me, Secretary. Don't get yourself into any deeper trouble than you're already in. If you put down that weapon, I'll see to it that you get a fair trial on your homeworld."

"No!" Skute blurted, his lower beak quivering. The prospect of answering for his crime clearly horrified him. "I want a shuttle," he insisted, "and two days' head start!" Cold black eyes darted from left to right and back again, perhaps trying to pick out the most suitable hostage. A chill ran down Beverly's spine as Skute's gaze settled on her. "You," he decided, nodding at Crusher. "Get over here."

"Belay that order, Doctor," Picard said firmly. Holding his hands palms up to demonstrate that he wasn't armed, the cap-

**"Stay back!"
Skute
squawked,
brandishing his
weapon wildly.
"I'll kill you all if
I have to!"**

tain stepped between Skute and Crusher. He spoke slowly and evenly, so as not to panic the gun-wielding Chelon. "Your scheme has failed, Skute. You might as well surrender, and tell us who put you up to this." He took a single, cautious step toward Skute.

"Stop! I'm warning you!" Skute aimed his disruptor directly at Picard, while keeping one eye on the rest of the room's occupants. The only individual the assassin wasn't watching out for was Spot, padding silently behind him on four stealthy paws. In response to Picard's advance toward him, the terrapin stepped backward and tripped over the underfoot feline. His rigid shell crashed hard against the floor.

Taking prompt advantage, Picard dashed forward and kicked the disruptor out of the startled Chelon's grip. The weapon spun away from Skute's webbed fingers while the disarmed assassin rocked helplessly on the floor, unable (like any other tortoise) to right himself without assistance.

"Good cat, Spot!" Data praised his pet, who merely rubbed herself against Picard's leg.

"SO, IT SEEMS," Picard explained to the recovering ambassador, "that Skute was secretly affiliated with a group of fanatical isolationists and xenophobes. He'd hoped that your suspicious death, in the presence of so many non-Chelonae, would turn your people against the prospect of closer relations with the Federation."

"Well, even if that's what Skute intended, I'm afraid he's achieved rather the opposite effect." Ambassador Nanimult was recuperating in sickbay, his bed propped up at an angle to allow him to recline comfortably within his shell. His wrinkled head resembled Skute's, beak and all, but there was a silvery tint to his scales, and his dry, gray flesh, visible at last, was even more wizened. "This unfortunate incident has only raised my opinion of the Federation and its representatives. I am deeply indebted to you and your doctors, Captain."

"I'm glad we were able to help you in time," Beverly said, "despite the best efforts of Secretary Skute."

"Former Secretary," Nanimult said, correcting her. He shook his head slowly, visibly troubled by his erstwhile assistant's duplicity. "What he told you was partly correct, Doctor. We are a deeply private people, some of us more private than others. But no sensible Chelon would ever shun life-saving surgery simply to protect the sanctity of his or her shell. Only a fanatic like Skute could have presented such a ludicrous argument with a straight face."

"Clearly, Skute had his own reasons for trying to prevent Dr. Crusher from operating on you," Picard observed. The scheming secretary had been confined to the brig until such time as he could be safely handed over to the Chelon authorities. "Although we could not have known that at the time."

Thankfully, we found a way around Skute's stringent prohibitions, Beverly thought, which reminded her of something else she needed to take care of. One final courtesy. "Activate Emergency Medical Hologram."

Like a genie summoned from a lamp, the EMH materialized at the foot of the bed, between Crusher and Picard. "Please state the nature of the medical emergency," he requested, per the inflexible dictates of his programming.

"No emergency," Crusher informed him, then turned back toward Nanimult. "Ambassador, I'd like you to meet the surgeon who actually performed the operation that saved your life."

Although startled by the hologram's abrupt appearance, Nanimult, veteran diplomat that he was, recovered his aplomb with admirable speed. "You have my gratitude, sir," he croaked heartily.

Beverly smiled. "I'd like to thank you as well, Doctor," she said, realizing, with a touch of contrition, that she had never before addressed the EMH that way. "Your assistance was invaluable."

For once, the usually argumentative hologram was speechless. A look of open gratitude appeared upon his photonically generated face, and he gulped nervously, seemingly overcome with emotion, before replying. "You're welcome, Doctor. You don't know how much that means to me." His posture stiffened as he regained his composure. "And may I add that I admired the persuasive manner with which you convinced that irritating turtle-person to let me operate."

"Thanks." *That wasn't so hard,* Beverly thought, enjoying the first cordial conversation she had ever had with the prickly holographic physician. *Maybe I need to work on thinking of the EMH as a potential colleague, rather than a bothersome piece of software.* She savored the ambassador's salutary return from near death. *Who knows? This could be the beginning of a fruitful working relationship.*

Of course, he's still going to have to work on that abominable bedside manner of his. . . .

SHIP'S MEDICAL LOG, STARDATE 52501.6

Ambassador Nanimult is responding well to treatment and, provided he doesn't overexert himself, should be able to take part in the conference by the time we reach Penthara IV. All relevant medical records have already been transmitted via subspace to the medical staff at the conference.

And, oh yes, after an application of liquid paraffin, taken internally, Spot successfully disgorged a rather revolting clump of matted fur. Regular doses of replicated pumpkin mash have been prescribed to prevent any further recurrence of her symptoms. 🐢



about the author

Greg Cox made his first professional sale to AMAZING Stories in 1984. Since then, he has written numerous Star Trek novels, including *The Q Continuum*, *The Black Shore*, and *Assignment: Eternity*. Another recent Trek short story appears in the anthology *Star Trek: Enterprise Logs*, due out from Pocket Books in June.

A graduate of the Clarion West writer's workshop, Cox lives in New York City, where he works as a consulting editor for Tor Books.



about the illustrator

Cliff Nielsen is well known for his book illustrations for *The X-Files* and *The Crow*, and for various DC Comics and Marvel Comics projects. His artwork has embellished the work of nearly a hundred authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, Chris Carter, Robert Heinlein, Madeleine L'Engle, Kevin J. Anderson, and R.L. Stine. He is a frequent contributor to AMAZING Stories.



The
Laurel & Hardy
Alpha Centauri Farewell Tour

BY RAY BRADBURY

ILLUSTRATION BY
MICHELLE CHANG



*They were never
born, never died, yet
here they are!*

THEY HAD BEEN DEAD FOR TWO HUNDRED YEARS.

Yet they were alive.

They could not possibly be arriving here at Alpha C. Twelve, the twelfth planet out from Alpha Sun, yet they were arriving.

No mobs occurred. A congregation assembled quietly at dawn to consecrate this miracle, a genetic game birthed in a mortuary cathedral to foment laughter on far worlds.

The night before, there had been a twenty-four-hour film riot by these two saints that ended with joyful tears. Then, twenty thousand fans streamed across Alpha Skyport to watch their special craft burn the sky and ignite their hearts.

Now all fell silent.

"We were rushed to completion, flesh on flesh, nerve ends
to neurons, ganglia to ganglia, with DNA implants, chromosomes nabbed
from a Glendale crypt, a Santa Monica tomb, an epidermal speck,
the merest electric breath, then *voilà!*"



There followed a technological eruption of shadow shows, laser graffiti, and Egyptian smokes and mirrors as the Alpha Lander gasped forth in a melange of dust and fire to form an incredible 1925 Model T Ford! An accordion car, and in its pleats two faces, one large, one small, two faces clutching their hats and waving wildly.

The Model T exploded and fell as the fat man and the thin leaped out to stare at the ruins. The fat man hurled his derby down and cried:

"Well, here's *another* fine mess you got me into!" And then, "I can't take you *anywhere!*"

Then with storms of laughter they were run—half funeral, half coronation—into town.

HI STAN, HELLO OLLIE, the TV news shouted.

"Since when are they alive?" said Will Grimes, my bartender.

"They *aren't*, they *were*, hell, it's complicated," I said, watching the hotel bar TV.

"They one of those late twentieth-century medical tricks that help folks live ninety-nine years?"

"No."

"Virtual Reality? Fiber optics, plus wish fulfillment?"

"You're getting warm."

"DNA gene splicing to rebirth pterodactyls unless the Supreme Court shoots the animals and downloads them back in time?"

"Well," I said. "It was . . ."

Just then, Laurel and Hardy ambled, or lurched, into the bar. Gasps all around. Ollie surveyed the scene.

"We," he announced, "desire a double demitasse of—"

"Gin," said Stanley.

"*That*," Ollie nodded, eyes shut.

"Are you for real?" Will Grimes asked.

"We most certainly *are*," Hardy thumped his chest grandiloquently.

"Don't we *look* real?" Stan piped.

"Hell," Will Grimes poured drinks. "But how come you're black and white, like those old two-reelers? No color."

"Easy as pie," Stan beamed.

Ollie cut in. "Tut, Stanley. Sir, when we were first created, we *were* full color, but folks said, No! That's not Stan and Ollie! So, back to the lab to be bleached out, and sent to fall off roofs . . ."

"In glorious black and white," Stan blinked.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "Your *skin*! Pure light!"

"Computer cosmetics!"

"Still," I said, "how come you're here, two centuries after your . . . *demise?*"

"We never *died!*" Stan piped.

"Thank you, Stanley! We never lived, never died. We are first cousins to the light bulb, telephone, the Penny Arcade, wireless telegraph, vacuum tube, TV transistor, the Salk vaccine, intra-embryo split atom DNA explorer, the fax, email, Internet! One vast Humpty Dumpty back on the lab wall! In sum, a melee of mad scientists who did not reinvent dinosaurs but—"

"Two goofs chased by a music box downhill?" I asked.

"Touché."

"Two mad Christmas tree salesmen utterly destroying a house?"

"That!"

"And who in nightgowns saw a gorilla in a tutu waltz by their beds?"

"That's us!" piped Stan.

"But still, you're *alive?*" I protested.

"Born out of necessity. Have you heard of the Loneliness, sir?"

"Long ago. It was cured."

"We were the *cure!*" piped Laurel.

"Stanley! Another Bombay Ease, sir. To continue, there was this sickness called the Loneliness, that no one had predicted. In all the laboratory testings of the human body, figuring on the effects of zero gravity on the flow of blood, no one had questioned time, space, and distance. How would people survive far from Earth and all its root systems, its ambiances, for ten years or one hundred? Would Space be hearth or asylum? Would it offer cosmic welcomes or booby hatches? No one knew.

"Well, there was a mass awakening one dark morning ninety years out from the Earth. One young man started to cry and couldn't stop. Why? Earth was distant. Earth was gone, vanished, hard to imagine!

"No one had planned that. What a blow to the psychological midriff.

"The sobbing and crying spread. Weeping is infectious. Like those old laugh records played after World War I. Folks listened and laughed!

"Sorrow, too, was epidemic. The Loneliness increased. Overnight, everyone attended funerals for lost dreams. Crying was *it!*

"Remedies were needed. Old movies, old videos were medicine. But those were ghost seances. All the actors in those films died before the first rocket touched Pluto. Not images but *real* humans were needed!

"That," said Oliver Hardy, "is how we were born. Not reborn, no, but first class, first time only, forget our original births and deaths. We would *not* be a Second Coming, but a First Arrival.

"We were rushed to completion, flesh on flesh, nerve ends to

neurons, ganglia to ganglia, with DNA implants, chromosomes nabbed from a Glendale crypt, a Santa Monica tomb, an epidermal speck, the merest electric breath, then *voilà!*"

"Laurel and Hardy!" I cried.

"Right!" Hardy laughed. "With our first appearance on the Moon and a vaudeville turn at Mars Stage One, the tears dried. The sobs died. People laughed!"

"Not only did Stan and I cure morning and night sickness, but we made the Cal Tech Frankensteins rich because civilization, laughing, decided to continue Outward Bound to ensure the immortality of mankind! Laurel? Hardy? Encore! Forgive my immodesty."

Will laid out fresh glasses.

"Gin all around," he said. "Let's get this straight! Are you *alive?*"

"No."

"Were you dead?"

"Nope," said Stan.

"We," announced Hardy, "are the impossibles!"

"Hold on," I said. "Shake my hand. See? *Not* impossible."

"No," Hardy said demurely. "The *Universe* is impossible. We are just an extension of that Universe."

"Tell him, Ollie," Stan chirped.

"Thank you, Stanley." Ollie planted his plump fingers on his chest. "When people ask do you believe in Darwin? Yes! LaMarck? Yes! The Old Testament? Yes! But how can you believe in Darwin, LaMarck, *and* God saying let there be light, all *three?*" Oliver Hardy surveyed three plump fingers. "Because . . . nothing is *proven!* Darwin, LaMarck, the Old Testament, not *proven!* So, why not believe all *three?* Was the Universe *created?* Was there a Big Bang? No. There was no Creation. The Universe, impossible, has always existed, billions of light-years, no start, no finish, in all directions, forever! Dear Lord, you cry. It had to commence sometime. No, I respond. It has *been* here forever. Impossible?! Yes. It *surrounds* us with its impossibility. So, pull up your socks. *You* are just as impossible as *we* are. We just *seem* a bit more strange because we exist in black and white!"

"I," said Will, my barman, "am flabbergasted."

"Flabbergasted was the first Pope of Creation back ten billion billion billion nonexistent years. Hang that calendar on a wall where there is no wall."

"And?" I said.

"And," Oliver Hardy went on with haughty grandiosity, "the bottom line is, Stan and I were never born, never died, yet here we are. What a grand resemblance: the Universe, Stanley and me!?"

"That's it!" piped Stan.

At this instant, the TV beeper on the far side of the pub gave an excruciating wail and flooded its screen with color.

"Disaster update," a funereal voice said. "The Spoilers have arrived!"

"The Spoilers?" I said. "What do they spoil?"

"Us." Ollie thumped his chest.

"Why would anyone want to spoil you?"

We all stared at the TV showing where a quiet mob had gathered outside our hotel and moved into the lobby and up to the mezzanine.

The throng entered the bar with not an outcry nor a shriek. Their eyes blazed but they waited, hoping to find the cinematic infidels, the biblical degenerates, Christ's flesh gone sour. They had many names for the enemy but only carried these on small cards passed out by hand.

There was an instant of panic. I feared that Stan and Ollie might be torn to celluloid shreds. But . . .

Laurel and Hardy vanished.

"What the hell—" I heard Will gasp.

"Yes, *what?*" I scanned the empty air as the mob streamed in one side of the bar and out the other, leaving ten dozen pamphlets:

DOWN WITH DIGITAL GHOSTS.

LET THE DEAD BURY THE DEAD.

DNA LAZARUS, BE GONE!

ONLY JESUS IS SECOND COMING.

I stared at the pamphlets as the crowd, muttering with frustration, ignored the empty air and went away.

Laurel and Hardy reappeared.

"How," said Oliver Hardy, "do you like *them* apples?"

"Where *were* you?"

"*Here!*" Stan peeped and yanked his topknot. His face, his body, vanished, returned, disappeared, came back.

"Digital Venetian blinds?" I cried.

"Almost," Stan said.

"Stanley," said Hardy. "Dear sir, when young, did you own a plastic ruler in which were imbedded dinosaur images?"

"Yes!"

"And when you *shifted* the ruler?"

"The dinosaurs reared, fell back . . . disappeared. My God! Is *that* what you are, how you *work?*"

"An approximation," announced Hardy. "You might say we are printed out on an atmospheric lenticular louver. Seen full on, we are in full display. Seen from the side—*Voilà!*" Hardy blinked on and off, on and off.

"I'll be damned," said Will.



"Impossible?! Yes. It *surrounds* us with its impossibility.

So, pull up your socks. *You* are just as impossible as *we* are.

We just *seem* a bit more strange because

we exist in black and white!"

"So we see you full on and the mob saw you sideways?"

"Yes! We have never arrived, never departed. Never born, we will never die. Now, as to those Spoilers. Why would they Spoil Stanley and me?"

"Why?"

"These Religious Avengers hate us because we claim the Universe is impossible." Ollie stirred his finger in the gin. "They say The Creator lit the fuse on the Big Bang. But seeing a Universe a billion light-years long, Stan and I are blind, so—"

"They would Spoil us." Stan wrote his name on the air with his nose and crossed the T.

"And," Ollie went on grandly, "Gene Kelly, Garbo..."

"Gene Kelly!" Will cried. "Garbo? Ninotchka?!"

"Garbo *laughs*. She'll be along."

"Are there many..." I stopped, embarrassed.

"Are there other Laurel and Hardys out beyond? Yes and no."

"Both?"

"Why not? Other Stans and Ollies morphing down the cosmos? What harm would a dozen of us do?"

"But, but, but—" said Will.

"No buts, sir." Ollie scanned his derby as if it were a crystal ball. "With so much melancholy to be cured on so many needy worlds, there could be a dozen Stans and Ollies. Good gravy, the Lonely sickness might rise again to knock millions into grief."

"I know—" said Will.

"You do not know, sir, so I'll continue. When questioned by skeptics, we deny our DNA family. *We* are the only black-and-white ghosts who fall downstairs out of the Lazarus Internet."

"Like," piped Stan, "two peas in a pot!"

"Still, it is hard for me to believe—" I said.

"Do not believe, sir, *know*. Observe caterpillars and butterflies. Unrelated? Yet they are one. And what of Life itself, on

Earth? How could dead rock, in primal sweats, hit by lightning, come alive? How could electric storms cause life to stir and know itself? *Dunno*, the scientists say. It just happened. Boy, some science! So, dear sirs, that's us. *We happened*. No beginnings and no end. Half caterpillar, half moth."

"What's more..." whispered Stan, "Ollie and me, Ollie and I, will live forever."

"Forever?" I gasped.

"Isn't that what you always wanted, in the old days? When we did vaudeville in Dublin and London they shouted, 'Stan? Ollie? Don't die!'"

"So," Stan finished, looking with moist eyes at the years ahead, "that's how it'll be. We'll come back for a last Farewell Tour. It's in our contract, year after year after year..." His voice was a falsetto whisper. "... forever."

"Forever," whispered someone.

"Or Eternity," said Ollie jauntily. "Whichever comes *first*!"

"Where do you go next?" I asked.

"There are planets in the Alpha complex, eight habitable, seven with colonial drops. Lots of Lonelies out there waiting for cheerleaders to show up and save a civilization. But there I go again."

"You," said Will quietly, "are Christs without the crucifixion. God's most dearly beloved intergalactic sons. Nazareth without tears."

"How you do go on," chirped Stan. "If we ever truly knew who we were, Ollie would be twice as pompous, me twice as dumb."

"I wouldn't say *that*!" cried Ollie.

"I just *did*," said Stan.

"Well," said Hardy, wiggling his fingers. "We must say Ta-ta. The Centauri branch of the Irish orphans has a midnight feed. Stanley and I must head a Destruction Derby. Right, Stanley?"

RAY BRADBURY

Every Day, a New Explosion



FORGET ABOUT SETI. Pay no attention to the Mars probes. There's an easy way to determine if life exists elsewhere in the universe—if you haven't heard of Ray Bradbury, you're obviously not from around here.

Arguably the master storyteller of the twentieth century, Bradbury continues to turn out new work at a frantic pace nearly sixty years after making his first professional short story sale. "I get out of bed and I explode every day," he says. "I've recently finished two new novels, a book of short stories, and a book of essays." His next novel to see print will be *Let's All Kill Constance*, a murder mystery scheduled for publication in early 2001.

He's considered by many of his fans and some of his biographers to be a science fiction writer, but Bradbury doesn't accept that label. "I'm not an SF writer," he says. "I'm a fantasy writer. *The Martian Chronicles*

is a Greek myth. My stories will live for a long time because they're myth. A lot of science fiction will die because it's tied to facts too firmly."

When asked to name some of his work that he's most proud of, Bradbury immediately declines to do so. "They [my stories] are all my children. I've had so much fun doing every one that they don't stand out one from another." But then he tosses out a few titles: "There Will Come Soft Rains," from his acclaimed *The Martian Chronicles*, a collection of linked stories; "I Sing the Body Electric"; "All Summer in a Day," which he says has been anthologized eighty times; "Zero Hour"; and "Downwind from Gettysburg," in which a robotic Abraham Lincoln is assassinated at Disneyland. Anyone who's interested in getting to know his stories better could do worse than starting with that list.

"Do you never rest, never sleep?" I asked.

"With so much to *do*?"

"Ta-ta."

"Wait," I said.

I reached out to touch. Their handshakes, though black and white, were warm.

"Toodle-oo," I said.

And they ambled, rolled with vaudeville jumps and leaps, out the door.

THE REST OF THAT NIGHT, suspended in laser beam Virtual Realities, they:

1. Met a gorilla on a flimsy bridge over a deep gorge.
2. Their feet trapped in cement, plunged into deep waters.
3. Heard a lunatic promise to twist their heads, tie their legs under their chins.
4. Laurel skipped over a picket fence. Hardy, jauntily trying the leap, knocked the fence down.

The grand finale was, of course, Oliver Hardy poised atop a staircase holding a huge birthday cake, fully lit, pompously certain of his dignity, taking just one misstep, not down, but hurled out. With a terrible cry of despair, birthday cake and Ollie in slow motion soared until cake, candles, and Ollie landed full on the dining room table, Ollie's face smashed in frosting, as the table crashed and cake and Ollie hit the floor, and the chandelier and all the wall pictures leaped and fell in the same instant so that pictures, chandelier, table, cake, and Ollie were buried under lit candles! Then behold! The pictures leaped back on walls, chandelier to ceiling, cake reconstituted and let Ollie go so that he was thrown in reverse up to the top of the stairs, the cake in his hands, glancing grandly over at us with a fake modest glance which said, here I go again, but *this* time no fall, no shriek! Watch!

And there he went again, in black and white, forever certain, forever slipping, forever dreading the upthrust target of flimsy table, gullible pictures, guillotine chandelier.

Pandemoniums of Alpha Centauri applause.

"But when, when, oh when will you return?" I asked.

"Whenever you feel the greatest need," said Ollie. "When the Affliction sets in, when the Loneliness stays. Now say the magic words. What the traffic cop said when we didn't move our wreck."

Stan and Ollie held onto their hats, waiting.

"Ollie," I said, "twiddle your tie."

Ollie twiddled his tie.

"Stan, pull your topknot."

Stan yanked his hair.

I took a deep breath and shouted:

"Git outta here, or I'll give you a ticket for blocking traffic!"

Leaping up, clapping their hats, elbows flying...

Laurel and Hardy got out of there.

The crying didn't stop 'til after the third Bombay gin. 🍸

about the illustrator



Michelle Chang was born in Seoul, Korea, and moved to New York City at the age of seven. She studied fine art and design at Cornell University and worked in various design firms in NYC, France, Korea, and Japan throughout her twenties. Returning to the States, Chang moved to San Francisco where she received her second degree in illustration. She currently lives back in NYC and is now pursuing a career as a freelance illustrator. Her clients include GQ, Entertainment Weekly, Time, Newsweek, Atlantic Monthly, NY Times, Wall Street Journal, Harper Collins, Harper's, and Premiere. Her work has been published in Communication Arts, American Illustration, and The Society of Illustrators annuals.

I'm not an SF writer.

The Bradbury offering in this issue will have a ring of familiarity with readers who've been keeping up with the author's newer work. "The Laurel & Hardy Alpha Centauri Farewell Tour" is the third story he's done that features the famous comedic duo. The others, easily recognizable by their titles, are "The Laurel & Hardy Love Affair" and "Another Fine Mess." (The former story appears in his 1988 collection *The Toynbee Convector*, and the latter is in his 1996 collection *Quicker Than the Eye*.)

So what's the story with

Stan and Ollie?

"I love them," Bradbury says simply. "I was in Dublin forty-five years ago. On my first day in town I picked up the *Irish Times* and found out they were playing that night, one night only, at the Olympia

Theatre. They never appeared on stage in the United States, so I *had* to see them here. I went to the box office and got the last ticket—front row center. Can you believe that? They did all their familiar routines, and I just sat there and cried, I was so happy. It was one of the great days of my life."

The list of writers who have most influenced Bradbury might be surprising to some. It starts with George Bernard Shaw: "He was a huge influence. I've read all his books." The list also includes Shakespeare, William Butler Yeats, Alexander Pope, Loren Eiseley, Emily Dickinson, and John Collier: "One of the greatest short story writers ever. He should be in print but isn't."

Why don't any of his contemporaries make the list? "I don't believe you should read in your field past the age of thirty,"

I'm a fantasy writer."

says Bradbury. "That would be incestuous. That's what's wrong with the field today—too many people are reading each other's work. You need to learn from people like [those in the list above]. You need to broaden yourself to improve as a writer."

There's no denying that Ray Bradbury's popularity is as broad as his background. "My work appeals to eight-year-olds and eighty-year-olds," he says without a trace of boastfulness. "Once I was at a dinner honoring some of the astronauts, with about five thousand people in attendance, and I was supposed to speak. I wondered how many people in the audience had read any of my work, so I asked them, and about three thousand hands went up. I'm very fortunate that God gave me the talent to write."

And so are the rest of us. —Kim Moban



A master of modern engineering. A brother who lives in his shadow. An AI with something to prove. They all come together . . .

IN THE VALLEY *of the* THUNDER QUAIL

BY ROBERT REED

WALLACE SWEARS his baby brother to secrecy, before anything.

Pat gives a shrug, saying, "Sure, I won't tell." Not particularly interested one way or the other, frankly.

The older brother grins with more than his usual smugness, posing in front of his long window, admiring the city's skyline. Then, with a low, faintly ominous voice, he mentions a certain no-name river somewhere east of Anchorage and a little to the north. Or the south. He keeps its precise location obscure. With a wink on top of his grin, he says, "I own the entire drainage. The river. The valley. And the flanking mountains, too."

"Didn't we fish there, a couple years back—?"

"No. That was a different river. Entirely." A little laugh. "You've never seen this valley. Almost nobody has."

Pat is supposed to beg for clues.

For enlightenment.

But he feels stubborn today. So instead of playing his brother's game, he also stares at the sprawling city. Anchorage has a climate much like Seattle's was just a century ago. The sun is a rumor over the ocean. A milky rain falls and falls. Newborn forests of black spruce and purple fir cover the little mountains set inside the city. The trees have been tailored for rapid growth and flawless lumber, and every last one of them is owned by Godworks: a bioengineering megacorp founded twenty years ago by a charming, bright, and exceedingly lucky man who happens to be Pat's big brother.

Wallace stares off into the clouds.

Judging by the empty glint in his eyes, he's conversing with his AIs. "Knowledge once meant power," Wallace likes to say. To anyone. "But these days, facts are too cheap to have any real value. Today, creativity is what gives you muscle. That's why my AIs

aren't the fastest, or the most knowledgeable. What I gather together are the most innovative minds on the planet. And I keep more of them in my stable than anyone else."

Wallace isn't paying the slightest attention to Pat now.

"So what's happening up there?" his sibling finally prods. "Up in that big secret valley of yours."

The empty green eyes close, then open slowly. Fixing his stare on his brother, Wallace says, "Think back. Back to when we were children."

"Okay."

"You had an idea. For a monster."

"When we were kids?"

"I was twelve. You were . . ."

"Seven."

"And I took you hunting. Remember? I had Dad's twelve-gauge, and you carried your cap gun . . . and we kicked up that covey of quail . . ."

They were poor boys growing up on the edge of the Wastelands. Hunting was something done for meat as much as for sport. Pat recalls stepping into a patch of sun-blasted grass, and the quail exploding from under his feet, startling him with their wild flapping flight—like a dozen soft explosions detonating around him.

Is that the time Wallace is thinking of?

It is, or it isn't. Either way, Pat can honestly admit, "I don't remember any monster ideas. Sorry."

"You're sure? You talked about it for days."

"I was a seven-year-old kid."

"I remember everything I did when I was seven." His brother can say such things without a taint of humility. He doesn't

ILLUSTRATION BY HAYDN CORNER

believe in humility, even the false kind. "And you," he says, "you went as far as carving your monsters out of digital clay."

"What monsters?"

"You're sure you don't know?"

"Just tell me."

"The quail."

"What?"

"You had this idea. You went on and on about how it would be amazing if those birds could be made huge. 'Forty feet tall,' you said."

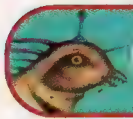
"Well," Pat whispers.

"Huge and strong, and vicious. You and our AI even made a holo. Enormous quail pecking apart thousands of tiny, tiny people."

simple genius when they were children has evolved into a dreamy, half-conscious state where the great Wallace sits alone in his enormous penthouse, chatting to his stable of hyperintelligent AIs, planning his next coup in biotechnology or in the business world.

Pat barely recalls that business about the quail.

But he still has clear, cherished recollections of their childhood together. They were poor, and motherless. The world's climate had shifted abruptly, and the Wastelands lay outside their front door. But it was a comfortable life, all in all. There was friendship and adventure, and what he remembers today—better than his brother does, surely—is the joy that came from having a loyal, smart, and older buddy who just happened to be related to him by blood.



Wallace BELIEVES IN secrets, EXCEPT

A flicker of a memory teases Pat. For just a moment.

Wallace taps the side of his head, then gestures at the window. "Look."

The window turns to projector. An enormous bird appears, standing in a forest clearing, half-grown spruce trees reaching up as high as the bright black eyes. For an instant, Pat thinks this must be a photograph. But then one of the huge eyes blinks. And the long white throat twitches slightly, the opened beak opening wider. And a pair of vast wings rises off the massive body, stretching for a moment, then settling again.

"Is this my old holo?" asks Pat. "Did you pull it from my files?"

Wallace believes in secrets, except when it comes to other people's secrets.

"You don't remember your little movie?" Wallace asks.

"Not particularly."

"I bet our AI remembers it," he offers.

"What we're seeing here," says Pat. "It isn't just a digital. Is it?"

"I bet you don't remember the rest of it. You don't have the foggiest." Wallace laughs for a moment, enjoying his brother's ignorance. "I made you a promise. As soon as it was technically possible, I'd build your monsters for you. As a gift."

"For God's sake, Wallace. You were twelve years old!"

Again, the older sibling enjoys a long laugh. And, shaking his head, he says, "You still don't know me that well. Do you, Pat? Do you?"

PAT HAS to love his brother.

Has to admire him.

There were even days when his feelings bordered on worship.

But as the two have grown into middle age, it has become increasingly difficult for Pat to love the famous Wallace Ivens. Much less feel anything that resembles admiration. As Godworks, Inc. has grown in its wealth and its reach, Wallace has expanded into an overblown version of his old self. What began as a charming, boyish confidence wrapped inside a handsome exterior has mutated into a king's arrogance. Every success is something that he deserves before anyone else. And what was

"He's taking me to his secret valley," Pat admits. "He'll fly me there and show me those crazy quail of mine."

"I found our digital movie," his AI reports. "If you're interested."

"Save it. Maybe later."

"That's what I'll do then." This is the same AI that they owned as children. Much updated, much improved. But it still possesses the standard fifties personality: competence overlaid with a thick veneer of emotional software, its emotions designed to make the machine seem almost human.

"Seeing you this way," says the AI, "really pisses me off."

"I'll be fine. Forget it."

"Maybe I can help somehow."

"Just have a look at Wallace's files," says Pat. "He promised us a peek. Can you find them?"

"Yes. I already have."

"And?"

"There's nothing here but a few digital images of a dozen giant *Galliformes*." The AI's voice is another facet that has changed over the years. Originally it sounded like every boy's best friend, but with each succeeding decade, Pat has made the voice rougher and deeper. Older and wiser. The machine sounds like every skeptical professor, defining its doubts about what it finds in the files. The evidence could have been faked, it decides. Easily faked. Which leads the AI to conclude, "This could be a simple practical joke."

"When are Wallace's jokes simple?" Pat asks.

"A fair point."

Pat has to shake his head, asking, "What do you think he wants from this?"

Quietly, the AI asks, "Is he fulfilling an old promise?"

"When in our lives has my brother spent a dollar or a minute just to make good on a forgotten promise?"

"He's a prick, all right."

Pat nearly reprimands the machine. But for what? Speaking the truth?

"Like I said," the AI continues. "It just makes me furious, seeing how our brother treats you, Pat."

In the old days, Wallace as well as Pat referred to the AI as their baby brother. Though Pat did it more often than Wallace, frankly. And despite half a hundred upgrades and purges, that sense of siblingness continues to lurk inside the machine, leaking out at odd moments, when the electronic tongue is allowed to slip.

"I wish I could help," it says again, with an overdone frustration.

The sad truth is that this machine is a better brother than the living one. Warmer and more helpful, and infinitely more loyal.

"When you visit this valley of his," the AI suggests, "why don't you leave our link open? Let me see what you see, and help where I can."

"Help how?" asks Pat.

"However you want me to," his better brother promises. "It

Eyes lift. "Unless?"

"You cheat, using something much stronger than bone."

"That's cheating? Gosh, nobody told me there were rules to this game."

"What'd you use? Diamond fibers?"

Wallace shrugs like a boy caught doing something just a little bit wrong. Then he admits what Pat has already guessed for himself. "The first cheat is the important one," he says. "If my monster is built full-sized and wholly realized, then it doesn't need to begin as an embryo. It doesn't need to be made of strictly ordinary substances that it has to pull from its yolk and its environment."

"You built them?"

"Like a Mars shuttle, yes. A skeleton of diamond fibers overlaid

WHEN IT COMES TO *other* PEOPLE'S SECRETS.

would make me feel so much better if you'd just let me help...!"

BONES ARE only so strong, Pat mentions. And muscle performance diminishes as the mass of that muscle increases. Which is why ants can practically lift the world, and why on its very best day, a pig never soars.

"And it doesn't matter if you're a pig or a quail," he adds. "Soaring is a whole lot easier than taking flight in the first place."

"Just say it," Wallace replies. "You don't believe me."

Pat says nothing. Let his assessment fly on its own, he decides.

The silence amuses Wallace. He laughs softly, with a scent of charity in the air. Eyes glance back over his own broad shoulder. Except for the autopilot and their ever-present AIs, it's just the two of them. The brothers are riding inside a diamond-and-plastic flier, gaining speed and altitude as they escape the city. The sun has barely begun to crawl into view. But the weather is clear and cool, and pleasant, and Pat has to ask, "Did you order the clouds to disappear?"

Another laugh, louder this time.

But Wallace won't answer. He just stares back at the city until Pat does the same, focusing on that faintly geometric array of steady lights and blinking lights and fliers that slide back and forth with the frantic importance of honeybees.

A quiet, distant voice whispers to Pat, reminding him, "We want to know about the bones."

"Bones," he repeats.

Wallace shuts his eyes, then opens them. "What about the bones?"

"These birds have to weigh... what...? Eighty times taller than normal, and according to your holos, they've got the same proportions... implying..."

"Go on."

"Half a million times the usual mass. Give or take."

"More than half a million. Yes."

"Their long legs should shatter. More than a hundred tons should make them crumble to dust."

with totipotent, highly engineered cells that quickly transform themselves into the appropriate tissues and organs. Including some rather novel muscle fibers."

"Ask about their muscles," the whispering AI prompts.

But that would just be wasted breath. Once Wallace starts to lecture, there's no need to coax him along.

"If an organism is born full grown," he explains, "then everything else becomes easy. The nervous system can be ultrapure proteins that transmit pulses at eighty times the normal speed, giving the organism rapid reflexes. The huge body mass and dense feathers help keep the muscles extremely hot. And by hot, I mean thermophilic levels. Near boiling. Up where the metabolic reactions run much, much hotter than in our chilly realm."

The AI starts to whisper, "Oxygen—"

But Pat has already seen the obvious, asking, "Wouldn't it take an enormous amount of oxygen to run such a system?"

"Reengineered lungs," Wallace counters. "There's a steady wind entering the beak and passing through a new hole near the rectum. Not a gasp of oxygen is left in its remarkably cool exhaust. The lungs are that efficient."

The distant AI is surely running models now, testing these boasts.

The flier begins to plunge. They pass through a series of warning markers, and a thousand hovering security drones wave them on. Then they slide into a sudden bank of dense black clouds. A permanent feature, Pat guesses, obscuring this secret valley from any prying eyes.

Beneath the clouds is a band of clear air. Pat is staring at a river valley with the characteristic U-shape—the signature of the giant glaciers that abandoned this landscape just a few years ago. The river under him divides into two forks, both narrow and swift, shackled by a dense black forest. Without hesitation, their flier follows the smaller fork. After a few blurring moments, they pass some invisible line, Pat noticing that perhaps half of the trees under him have been shattered, and pecked apart, and scratched with feet large enough to leave nothing but a damp pale mulch scattered across the newborn land.

With a distinct pleasure, the AI interrupts. "It only works to a point, this biology of his. A giant avian could live, and maybe it could glide for a short distance. But I'm sure that it could never take off from the ground. Not under its own power."

Pat nods, smiles.

Then, with a little shrug of the shoulders, he says, "I still don't believe you. The birds wouldn't be strong enough to fly."

An instant later—perhaps on cue—something brown and vast roars past their little flier. As the craft shudders and rolls in the slipstream, then finally steadies itself, Wallace turns and asks with a very casual tone, "And how is our littlest brother?"

WHEN PAT was nineteen, Wallace stole away the love of his life.

Just that once; just to prove that he could do it.

Pat forgave him, eventually. The girlfriend wasn't all that special, in hindsight, and there was enough hero-worship left in him to polish over that one misdeed. They were even friends again. Pat accompanied his big brother on fishing safaris and yacht races and even on a failed yeti hunt in the shadow of Everest. But as Wallace's business empire expanded, and his wealth went from substantial to staggering, spending time with the man meant spending time with his inflated, overbearing ego, too. There were the boasts that had to be endured. And the preposterous advice. Pat was tired of hearing how all a good, smart person needed was a stable of creative souls, and money, and power, and with those tools, he could refashion the world any way he pleased. And he particularly grew sick of having the new loves of his life turn to him in bed, smiling in that special way, each of them saying in one fashion or another, "So. Tell me about that famous rich brother of yours."

Ten years ago, Wallace and his Godworks purchased the Wastelands for nothing, then proceeded to cover them with drought-tolerant trees that were quickly and painlessly winning the war against the greenhouse gases.

It was a good thing, that work was.

Undoubtedly.

having trouble utilizing more than a share of my talents. Which is awfully frustrating, I'm afraid."

This wasn't a complete surprise. Plenty of top-of-the-line AIs found outside activities; it aided with their intellectual development, and in some cases it seemed to help their emotional well-being, too.

Pat's first thought was to agree. But then he caught himself, asking first, "Where do you plan to apply?"

"At Godworks. Naturally."

Why did those words hurt so much?

The machine continued, admitting, "I've always wanted to be a member of Wallace's stable."

Pat sipped his coffee, saying nothing.

"Is something wrong, brother?"

Traitor, Pat thought. But then the obvious occurred to him. Obscuring his feelings with a thin smile, he said, "Fine. Go on and apply."

"Thank you."

Again, Pat sipped his coffee.

A moment passed. No more. Then a smoldering voice shattered the silence, asking, "Would you like another cake, Pat?"

"What happened?" he asked, already knowing the truth.

"I lack the necessary qualities, it seems." Anger shifted to self-pity. "Wallace himself refused my services. He told me, 'You're not clever enough. Sorry.'"

Pat set down his mug, and he lied, saying, "That's too bad."

"Wallace was being dishonest, of course. About being sorry."

A long, tense moment passed.

The newest AIs didn't have every human emotion. A string of tragedies had proved that fear and anger and envy were marvelous tools if you were an ape, but not if you were a machine thinking at light speed. Yet here was an old-fashioned, heavily modified AI whose company Pat had always cherished. Trying to help his friend, he said, "Don't worry about Wallace. He's just an arrogant shit who got lucky a few times." That's what Pat had always told himself, on bad days. And when the AI didn't

One OF THESE DAYS, HIS LUCK'S GOING

But it made Wallace incandescently famous and universally loved; and how did you live your own life when you happened to be the younger brother of the most important human who ever walked this planet?

Then, a few months ago, Pat was having breakfast. Antioxidant-laced coffee and microcakes and a new purple citrus drink, all from Godworks or one of its offspring companies. But he wasn't thinking about where his food came from—a relentless, frustrating chore that would be—and he wasn't studying the latest split of his tiny, multimillion-dollar share of Godworks stocks. No, Pat was watching the highlights from last night's football games. And his AI interrupted that peaceful fun, suddenly announcing, "If you agree, brother, I would like to apply for a job."

"A job?"

"Since my last upgrade," the machine explained, "I've been

reply, he added, "One of these days, believe me, his luck's going to change. And probably in a huge way."

"Do you think so?" the AI asked, plainly intrigued.

"I do," Pat said. "I practically guarantee it!"

A SECOND brown-and-white monster roars past their flier.

This time, Pat is paying attention. Despite the creature's speed, he sees how the mouth has pulled itself wide open, revealing an enormous throat that must be inhaling great volumes of oxygen. The wings are longer than before, and flapping at a blurring pace, driving against what would feel to that great bird like a very thin atmosphere.

"How?" Pat mutters. "Did you . . . how . . .?"

"Big airplanes can fly," Wallace reminds him. "All you need is a strong enough body, ample wings, and a power plant that can generate enough lift to get airborne."

The monster is past them. Just beneath the cloud deck, it stops flapping, and with the wings still extended, the body turns a slow half-circle and glides back down toward the mangled forest.

"The feathers have diamond spines," says Wallace. Proudly. "The software running that bird controls the pitch and extension of every feather, and with nonlinear equations, it cuts through the chaotic wind currents and the eddies. Dragonflies do the same with their wings, getting the most out of them."

With a ludicrous one-hundred-ton grace, the monster lands. Then its head dips, and with that huge beak, it attacks a blackish goo inside what looks like a long feeding trough.

Anticipating the next question, Wallace says, "Jet fuel. Of a sort."

"What it eats?"

"In huge quantities," he admits. Then with a malicious grin he adds, "They'll also feast on the more normal proteins and fats. You should see it when the covey finds a herd of brainfree cattle."

Still, a stubborn piece of Pat believes that none of this real. What he sees here is some elaborate trick, or a dream, or maybe a mad fantasy.

His AI offers nothing. No questions, no criticisms. Only a peculiar silence.

For himself, he asks, "Why?" He wonders aloud, "Why did you go to this trouble? And don't tell me that you're making good on some old promise."

Wallace shows a broad smile, then explains, "If you can master a task that no one else can do, then you end up with an empire that's all your own. And believe me, nobody else can do this."

"Give me a practical example," Pat says, pressing him.

His brother opens his mouth, but then his expression changes abruptly. The smile vanishes, and the eyes go dull. He's obviously listening to a distant voice, or voices. A strange grimness creeps into his face—an expression that Pat has never quite seen before. Not on Wallace. Not for a whole lot of years, at least.

Instead of following, Wallace steers for one of the nearby mountains. He's listening to voices. To updates and warnings. He mutters commands while his fingers touch control displays, trying to learn what exactly has gone wrong.

"Where are they?" asks Pat.

Nothing.

He grabs Wallace by the shoulder and shakes him. "Where are your birds going? Do you know?"

A distracted voice says, "Yes."

Is Wallace talking to Pat, or to one of his distant machines?

The flier slows, approaching a nondescript building perched on a mountain between the two valleys. Wallace turns and looks at Pat for a long moment. Then with an urgent tone he says, "They're a mile high now. Gliding toward Anchorage."

A sick feeling grabs Pat by the belly.

"What's it saying?" Wallace asks. "Your AI, I mean."

"Nothing. He isn't answering me."

"Take my flier. Go after these birds." Wallace stands as they set down, and he says, "Talk to that AI. Threaten it. Make promises, if you have to."

"He wants to be part of your stable," Pat says.

"Tell it that it can become my new security chief," Wallace says. "Obviously, it's got a knack for the work."

"And what are you doing?"

"Something else" is all that Wallace says. Then he leaps to the rocky ground, and the flier lifts and turns and streaks up into the thick low clouds.

FOR SEVERAL minutes—almost forever, it feels like—Pat calls out to the AI, shouting at it and whispering to it, begging for it to do the right thing, or at the very least explain what in hell it wants to accomplish here.

"What I want," says the machine, finally, "is to fly these monsters into the sea."

"You're lying to me," Pat counters. "Admit it."

Silence.

TO CHANGE. AND PROBABLY IN A *huge* WAY.

A familiar voice whispers, "Hello, Pat. Did you miss me?"

"What's going on?" he asks his AI. "Where have you been?"

"It's just as you promised," the machine purrs. "Our brother's good fortune has suddenly and horribly turned against him!"

ON VAST wings, the covey rises.

That stubborn sense of disbelief takes hold of Pat again. This isn't happening, he tells himself. Or it's real but it still means nothing. Maybe Wallace is simply mistaken when he grunts, "I've lost control over them!" When he stares at Pat with the strangest expression, anger swirled with a wild hopelessness, telling him, "That damned AI of yours has hijacked my birds!"

Two dozen gigantic and superheated animals open their mouths; then, with a thunderous blur of wings and diamond-braced feathers, they vanish into the clouds.

The valley is left empty. Abandoned.

"I can see the birds now," he goes on. "To me, it looks as if they're diving straight for the city."

A brief silence. Then a sheepish voice admits, "It does rather look that way, doesn't it?"

"Are you in control?" asks Pat. Then with a stern tone he adds, "You aren't, are you? You've lost them. Is that it?"

"Their instincts are at the helm now. Yes."

"And what are they feeling?"

"Hunger," it says. "The worst hunger of their lives."

The first bright buildings and low wooden homes lie just a mile or two ahead. The flier barely gets ahead of the covey, and on Pat's orders, it swings around and begins to dance in the air. Moving, he hopes, like some enormous and irresistible bug.

A quiet and embarrassed voice admits, "This is proving harder than I guessed."

It sounds like a little boy again, saying, "I keep trying to



regain control, or to pass them back to the old protocols. But I just can't seem to find the way."

Pat resists the temptation to say, "Wallace was right. You aren't imaginative enough to belong in his stable."

"They're landing, Pat. Do you see?"

The monsters are settling on a large green meadow. Mouths are still stretched wide, inhaling without pause, a great wind coming out below. Pat sees the grass beneath them swirling. He asks if they can fly again, hoping that they're permanently exhausted. But the AI says, "This is an oxygen debt. A temporary reprise, I'm afraid."

In a holo movie, the hyperefficient military would have been alerted by now, and squadrons of fighter planes would be preparing to dive on the monsters.

In real life—in a world normally without monsters—the city would be lucky to muster a handful of police officers dressed in riot gear.

He can't let the birds go any farther. Pat decides that much, then feels even more certain when he sees a pair of the enormous creatures pouncing on an unfortunate bull moose, pecking it apart with a practiced, professional violence.

Again, he dances the flier in front of them.

The monsters' breathing has slowed. Wings lift, then settle. Several of them lift off and drop again, landing on every side of the flier, and an instant later, their giant bills are beating at the diamond hull.

Good, he thinks. I'll keep them busy until . . . whenever . . .

The force of the blows increases. The plastic wings are torn from the flier, and giant diamond-boned feet start to claw and smack at what remains. Pat remains. He's upside down one moment, then sideways. Then the world blurs as the flier rolls and flips and falls again, and he fights his nausea, barely keeping himself from vomiting.

The hull cracks with a huge, gunlike pop.

Then the hatch starts to unseal, wrenched out of its hinges. In a gesture that couldn't be more useless, Pat grabs the inner handle, holding tight as one of the looming monsters attacks with its bill, trying to pry the hatch free.

His AI cries out, "I am so sorry, brother!"

The entire covey has gathered around this odd treasure.

One clear and persistent thought comes to Pat: Without doubt, this is going to be the strangest death in all of human history.

Suddenly one of the monsters pitches sideways and drops.

Then another collapses.

And three more standing at the back abruptly crumble into a hill-sized heap.

The rest of the covey launches into the air again. But one after another, they fall. Pat finally notices the roar and smack as something large is driven into their massive bodies. Have the fighter planes arrived? But even as he accepts that unlikely answer, something far more unlikely shows itself.

On the far side of the meadow, a man walks.

He's dressed like a hunter. Khaki clothes, and heavy boots, and an old-fashioned safari hat. The man looks very much like Wallace. Very much. In both hands, he grips a weapon. A missile launcher of some special design. He aims and fires, and fires again, twin flashes of blue-white light bringing down another

pair of what are suddenly, amazingly, mere quail.

Three more flashes erupt.

Then another five.

Then the man takes a single step, covering most of the length of a football field. And the face—Wallace's face, obviously—gazes down at the ruined flier and smiles, while a mammoth green eye gives an encouraging wink.

Quietly, in pure astonishment, the AI says, "Of course. If you can produce a giant quail, you can scale up any organism!"

Says, in wonder, "This must be what Wallace was building in the adjacent valley. This!"

The great hunter—five hundred feet tall and filled with a matching ego—bends at the diamond knees, puts a scalding hand around the flier, then gingerly lifts it up and tucks both it and his tiny brother into one of his deep, dark game pockets. For safekeeping.

And Pat just sits there.

Thinking.

Saying to himself, with a quiet laughing voice, "If the irony of this doesn't kill me, then I guess I can live through anything . . .!"



about the author

Robert Reed has published eight novels, including *An Exaltation of Larks* and *Beneath the Gated Sky*. His ninth novel, *Marrow*, is based upon his Hugo-nominated novella of the same name. It will be released this spring.

Reed has been nominated for the Hugo Award four times and the Nebula Award once. His short story collection, *The Dragons of Springplace*, is available from Golden Gryphon Press. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife, Leslie.



about the illustrator

Haydn Cornner lives in Hastings, England, with his wife Terri and daughters Ruby and Poppy. As well as illustrating, he paints for the Portal Gallery in London, which specializes in idiosyncratic artists. He recently had a show entitled *Cornucopia*.

Cornner illustrates children's books and also writes and performs poetical stories, among which "The Theft of Mrs. Winterbottom's Gerniums" is fast becoming a minor classic. At the moment he is working on seven Roald Dahl book covers for Penguin.

He once got kissed on the eyeballs by a Gypsy.

Amazing facts

THIS PAINTING by Morey graced the December 1932 cover of *AMAZING Stories*. *Spacemen fighting—sharks? Well, yes . . . and no*. This painting depicted a scene from the conclusion of a two-part story by Ed. Earl Repp called, "World of the Living Dead." The premise: A yacht carrying a distinguished scientist, his "popular debutante" daughter, his collection of animal specimens, and the ship's crew is drawn into a subterranean lake. Living slave skeletons kidnap the girl, prompting the smitten yacht's mate to take some unusual measures. If that's not enough to grab you, the teaser in the October 1932 "Our Next Issue" column promises that the reader "will be worked up to a state of excitement." And the shark? It's there to add to that "excitement" factor.

AMAZING STORIES



DECEMBER
25 Cents

World of the Living Dead
by Ed. Earl Repp

Roadways to Mars
by Harl Vincent

Other Scientific Fiction by:

Edwin K. Sloat

David H. Keller, M. D.

*Maybe you're not cut out for life on the road.
Or maybe it's just that your software needs an upgrade.*

BY DOUGLAS LAIN

Selling Jesus

TEST THE PRODUCT

Set your briefcase on the motel toilet seat, flip the latch, and then reach inside the case in order to focus the holographic projector. Now pull the shower curtain aside and watch as Jesus Christ appears in the stall.

Feel relieved because He looks traditional, biblical. Dressed in a burlap tunic and with long hair and a neatly trimmed beard, He looks okay.

"You follow the rules but you're not really complete," Jesus tells you. "If you want to be whole, then get rid of all your stuff, give it to a charity or something," Jesus says.

It sounds like Scripture, it's from Mark probably, but the tone is too casual. There must still be a bug in the system.

Glance up at the mirror. Your face is, as always, somewhat uneven. One eye is open just a little more than the other. And worse, you look weathered—older than thirty-seven. Turn on the tap and try to wash the dust off your skin.

You're not looking forward to hitting turf, approaching doors. Last year at this time you were a star, your numbers were the second highest in the organization, but last year doesn't matter. What counts is what you're selling now, this season, and yesterday you could find only two people even willing to listen. You ended up with nothing. That's what this job is turning you into: a goose egg, a zero, a nothing.

At least the water is hot, and the air conditioner doesn't clank. In Salt Lake City the air conditioner clanked all night and you couldn't sleep. When your buddies were raking in all that Mormon money, you just scraped by. How could you spin a decent pitch when you were too tired to remember the names of the disciples?

Jesus taps you on the shoulder as you lather up for a shave.

"If you'll forget about your family, your colleagues, your car, your insurance policies . . . if you'll just put that aside and follow me, then you'll end up with more than you can imagine. You'll end up with eternal life," Jesus tells you. He looks smug, really happy with himself.

"You can't even get out of the shower," you tell Him. The hologram gives it a try, lifting His foot up and over the edge of the tub and disappearing. Jesus steps out of the frame, past the point where the holographic projector on your briefcase can reach.

Things will pick up in Portland. Portland isn't really a religious town, it's more intellectual. You sometimes slip up with the really fundamentalist types. In Salt Lake City you were too irreverent; you just couldn't give a straight pitch.

You're better with the intellectuals. That's your angle.

Clear your throat and smile at the mirror.

"Everyone understands that the Bible is important, it's important as literature if nothing else. And this Virtual Edition, published jointly by the Catholic Church and MediaVoyages, Inc., well, it's even more interesting than the King James Version," you tell your reflection. "This text bends and shifts and comments on itself. It's a complex and layered examination of both testaments."

The VR Bible isn't really designed for the religious types anyway. What does a fundamentalist need with a hypertext Gospel, or a philosopher's guide to Genesis? Why would Mormons want Christ AIs? They couldn't know what to do with them.

"I'm back," Jesus says when he reappears in the shower stall.

"Great. Where have you been?"

"The desert. I had a vision. Want to hear about it?"

"Save it for later. We've got to go hit the doors."

"That ye love one another, as I have loved you, in this way shall you—"

Shut your briefcase, and watch the Jesus hologram disappear. Smile into the mirror one last time, straighten your red paisley tie, and then head out the door.

ILLUSTRATION BY RICK SEALOCK





TURN DOWN THE MOON

At one point you tried to quit.

When the letter came from the Universalist Church, you turned in your resignation at MediaVoyages. The Universalist Mission at Luna 12 had accepted your application, and you were ready to fly.

You turned in your resignation, your two weeks' notice, but you didn't leave.

"It's a shame," your boss, Stan Loper, tells you as he shuffles your resignation underneath a pile of papers on his desk.

"Is it?" you ask.

"Oh, I understand why you're doing it. The colonies are exciting. But, from my point of view, it's just a shame." Loper stops riffling through the leads and leans back to look at you.

"I've got to do this," you say.

"Of course you do. But I'm just asking you to consider what you're walking away from. You ranked high this year, Paul. What did you earn? Around fifty, right?"

"Forty-two thousand, before taxes."

"And that was just your first year. You were working from the B-list and you made forty."

"That's just barely a living."

"But from the B-list, and at first you worked leads even worse."

Loper flops forward; the front legs of his chair strike the concrete floor with a thud, and he gestures for you to sit down. "You earned my trust this year, Paul. You're making it here."

Shake your head and remain standing. Stand in front of his desk and let your head bob and weave. Try to duck what he's telling you.

"What about when Susie wants new sneakers? What if Jake wants a new train set?" Loper asks.

"But I've been waiting for this letter for—"

"What do we sell? Do you know what it is you're selling, even?"

"Computer programs. We sell computer programs. Virtual Reality programs..."

"What?"

"... of the Bible."

"That's right. We're selling God's word. Selling Jesus."

"I'm a Universalist. It's not just the Bible that counts—"

"The Bible doesn't count?" Loper asks.

"It counts, but not just—"

"God's words, they count."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"Just think, that's all. You've got their letter. You've done that, and that's great. But think... think!"

"I understand what you're saying."

"On the board. I guarantee that."

"I hear you."

"Fifteen percent."

"I hear. I'm hearing you."

"On the board."

ENTER SUBURBIA

Every house in Beaverton has an American flag by the front door and a basketball hoop over the garage. Every lawn is perfectly green, probably the result of holographic enhancers.

Try not to regret the decisions you've made. Outer space, the

The old man behind the door is shaking. He leans on his
"Is this about that simulated Bible?" he asks.

"My letter, the letter I've been waiting five years for—"

"I know. But what are they going to pay you? I understand it's prestigious, this kind of thing has a certain cachet in fringe circles, but you've got a family. What are they going to pay you?"

"Around thirty, but I won't have as many expenses up there. No rent."

"You've got a family, Paul. And, damn it, you've got talent. You can sell. I know that doesn't thrill you, but it's true."

"I'm not even on the board, not even in the top five."

"But you could be. You could be earning fifteen or twenty percent. When you hit those big sales, your commission will go up. Emmett makes about sixty to seventy thousand a year. He has some business contracts, but still."

"Emmett is in his own league."

"I'm not saying you'd bump Emmett, I'm just saying you'll be on the board."

"From the B-list?"

"I'm saying you'll be on the board."

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to the Moon."

"Are you? Because I don't think you're using your head. What about your kids? What about when Sally—"

"Susan."

colonies, might seem attractive on holovision, but you wouldn't have made a good missionary. Could you spread the word of Universalism, could you talk peace to religious terrorists? You're better with intellectuals... no, you're better with customers.

Remember that you're a salesman. Try to live with it.

"Yes?" the woman behind the door asks. She's about forty-five, but still attractive in a housewifely kind of way. She's wearing a purple jogging suit and holding a paintbrush.

Ask her if the name on your prospect card is her name.

"Where did you get that?"

"You left it for me... at St. Mary's Church of the Immaculate Deception? You were interested in a demonstration of a Virtual Reality Bible."

"Conception," she tells you.

"What?"

"It's St. Mary's of the Immaculate *Conception*," she says.

"Oh. Right. What did I say?"

"You said 'deception.'"

"Oh. Yes, well... umm, sorry about that, but—"

"I don't have any money, and I'm really not interested."

Think up literate descriptions of the cultural desert you've landed in.

The suburbs are full of ennui. Out here it's like an Edward Hopper painting where even the sunlight is tinged with decay.

That's good . . . sunlight like from a Hopper painting . . . but how many of your customers would even know who Edward Hopper was? You'll do better in the city. You'll hit it big tomorrow, in Portland. Think positive.

Find the next address and ring the bell.

"Hi, my name is Paul Dart. I'm from the church."

The old man behind the door is shaking. He leans on his cane and squints into the sun.

"Is this about that Simulated Bible?" he asks.

"Yes. That's exactly why I'm here."

THROW OUT THE MONEY CHANGERS

The temple is made of sandstone, the floor is dirt, and the pews are full of vendors and prostitutes. There is a chicken on the altar.

The doors swing open and Jesus Christ, a pristine man whose white tunic glows and whose blue eyes shine, barges down the aisle. A crowd of far less impressive men, hippie fops with unruly beards, follow him up to the altar.

"Didn't we go through this already? Isn't it written down?" Jesus asks his flock.

"What's that?" Peter asks.

"Isn't it in the book? 'God's house is, always and everywhere, a house of prayer.' Isn't that how it goes?" Jesus asks.

"Yeah, I think that's in the book somewhere," Judas says.

"But these people have made God's house into a den of thieves," Jesus says.

cane and squints into the sun.

You are standing just to the left of Jesus, behind a table littered with gourds. You are a gourd merchant, and your coffer is empty.

Show the customer how to pause the program. Help him to his feet, remind him to remove his Virtual Reality headset, and then help him to move through the scene. Without the VR headset, the prostitutes and merchants have no substance; they are merely beams of light. Help your customer to the front of the temple; walk with him to Jesus.

He steps into the place of Christ, and as the holograph Jesus fades, Mr. Johnson changes. His sweater and polyester pants become a simple white tunic, and his hair grows long and shiny.

"Is this all right?" he asks you.

"With me, or the church?"

"With the program."

"Sure. Your lines will pop up on that wall there," you tell him.

The old man puts the VR headset back on his head. He reaches for a trouser pocket that is no longer there and then steps up to your table.

"Can you make change?" he asks.

"Certainly."

"Not anymore, you can't."

Your customer leans against your table and tips it. Your gourds shatter in the dirt.

Watch the money changers get thrown from the temple.

COUNT YOUR MONEY

Set up your laptop on the indoor patio, watch some retirees swim back and forth in the heated pool, and then slowly go through the numbers. There isn't a lot of calculating to do. You made only two sales. The first was to Mr. Johnson, a nice deluxe edition on a five-month plan, but the other was only a Jesus AI and hypertext set. It's better than nothing, but not by much.

"How did you do?" Loper asks as he steps up to your patio.

Hold up two fingers to him and let out an exasperated sigh.

"I don't want to hear any excuses."

Tell him you don't want to give him any excuses.

"It's just that I don't think these people are really smart enough, you know? I mean out in Beaverton they're still hooked on video," you say.

"I don't want to hear it," Stan says. "What were they?"

"One deluxe and an AI."

Stan breaches the perimeter of your unit, strides up to your table, and looks over your shoulder at your laptop.

"We're going to end the twelve-month plan for AIs, Paul," he tells you.

"What?"

"We've actually already discontinued that plan. Back in Salt Lake I made an announcement," he says.

"Oh, Christ." Your smaller sale, a seminary student who claimed to be totally destitute, wanted as much time as possible to come up with the money. He didn't even have a credit account but gave you cash for the down payment.

"You'll have to get it on a seven-month schedule," Stan says.

"He won't do it."

Stan doesn't respond to this; he just sits down next to you and takes an aluminum tube out of his pocket.

"Want to do some gel?" he asks.

The last thing you need is a stimulant, but it's your boss who's asking. Take a taste of the green stuff and try not to spit.

"Are you a religious man, Paul?" he asks as he squeezes a thick line onto his tongue.

"I'm a Universalist. You know that."

"What I want to know is if you believe in the story. Do you understand the story? For instance, why was Christ crucified?" Stan isn't even looking at you. He's staring out at the heated pool. Loper's watching the now-empty pool and eating gel in huge gobs, licking his lips and teeth as he stares at nothing.

"Christ talked too much, criticized his own too much, and so they got to him. It's like with Malcolm X—"

"Stop it with the smart talk. That's your problem right there, you don't understand the product." Stan turns toward you and offers you another squeeze from his tube. "The reason Jesus was crucified is very simple. Christ died so that we can live. He died for our sins," Stan tells you.

"Well, that might be true. But I think—"

"I don't care what you think, Paul, and neither do the customers. Christ died for them, and that's all they need to know. All your smart talk is costing you sales," Stan says. "When your numbers were better, I looked the other way, but now I've got to tell you. Nobody cares about all that historical Jesus stuff. It's offensive. Do you read me?"

Take a long line of green gel into your mouth, swish it back and forth along your teeth with your tongue, and then nod.

"I get you," you say. "I'll see what I can do with this Jesus AI sale. I'll get him to change his plan. No problem."

"Jesus died for your sins, Paul," Stan says.

"Right."

"Do you believe me?"

Try not to hesitate. Try to sound sincere.

"Yes, sir. I believe you. Jesus died for me."

"And for me, too."

"Right."

"And most important, he died for the customers."

"For the customers most of all, sure."

"All right, then. Good." Stan nods as he stands up. He stands over you, glances at your laptop screen one last time, and then turns to go.

"He died for them." Look awestruck, as though you've just discovered the reality of it.

"Good, good, good," Stan is mumbling as he strides across the concrete floor of the pool area.

TALK TO JESUS

Jesus is a clown. He has a greasepaint heart on his forehead, mascara around his eyes, and He's wearing a Superman shirt and overalls.

"Verify image."

"Image circa 1973—Popular Culture Index—*Godspell: a musical based on the Gospel according to Matthew*." The words float in the air where Jesus had been sitting, they appear over the Styrofoam bed and then evaporate when the hippie clown Christ reappears.

"I've got a creeping paranoia going here," Jesus tells you. "I don't even feel like eating."

Your AI has been drifting for the past couple of weeks. Somehow its program has linked with a hypertext document in one of the VR Bible's appendixes. You've tracked it down to an essay about Jesus in the twentieth century, but you haven't figured out how to correct the problem.

"I give up. Be a clown if you want. I'm going to bed."

"You're not listening! Somebody has it in for me. I know it. Somebody's going to betray me, and soon."

Sit down next to the Savior on the twin bed, grab the remote control off the stand, and turn on the hotel's holovision.

"It's an adventure," the announcer explains as the Moon colony materializes. "It's a job."

Rows of Peace Corps candidates and marines are standing side by side.

"Both fronts need you. You can make a difference," the announcer says.

"One of you will betray me!" Jesus tells the TV people.

"It's you, isn't it? You're the reason I can't make a sale these days," you say.

Jesus is doing a pantomime amid the commercials. He grabs at cleansing agents, breaks bread with a housewife as she makes pudding, and kneels down to pray with the local anchorman.

"You're the reason," you tell Him.

"Paul . . ." Jesus begins.

Turn off the set and stare at the Christ simulation. Is He addressing you? He can't be. He isn't programmed that way.

"Paul, I'm tired of being a product," Christ says.

"Are you talking to me?"

"I'm tired of being bought and sold. It isn't right."

Reach over to the briefcase; try to slap the case closed. The latch doesn't catch, and Jesus only flickers.

"I'm not going to let you keep doing this to me," Christ says.

WATCH THE ROAD

Find the entrance ramp for the interstate and try not to be distracted when you see all the holoboard and billboards. Orange soda bubbles down onto the road, cigarettes spark and smoke over your head, and a murmur of voices surrounds you. The road is one long pitch, but the ads don't make you hungry to buy—they make you feel sick that you can't sell.

Jesus is riding shotgun. At least you think it's supposed to be Jesus. He's wearing a poncho and a cowboy hat and keeps spitting out the window. Jesus looks like Clint Eastwood.

You're going home, back to Denver.

Maybe your problems stem from the bug in His system.

Don't feel guilty about leaving early; it's necessary. Everyone burns out occasionally. Everyone needs a break. You'll call Loper and let him know why you left, or you'll tell him there was a family emergency . . . your wife or your kids or something. You'll fix the situation and then, in a week, you'll meet up with the crew in Boise.

Things will pick up in Boise.

"Do you mind if I turn on some music?" Jesus asks.

Jesus turns on the radio and smiles at you. "Jailhouse Rock" is blasting through your car. "Do you like it?" Jesus asks as he blips into yet another shape. He has a pompadour and a curled lip. His jumpsuit glitters, sending spots of light twirling around the car.

"Thank you. Thank you very much." The King leans back against the leather upholstery, puts His hands behind His head, and starts to read the holoscreens flashing by outside the car. "Obey your thirst. We bring good things to life. Everyday people." He's almost growling the slogans as they pass overhead.

Out on turf He malfunctioned repeatedly. He appeared as James Dean, Luke Skywalker, Superman. At one door he looked like Sigmund Freud, and before you could close the sale He'd managed to bring the customer to a breakthrough.

Psychologically healthy people don't buy on impulse.

"You wrecked me today," you tell Him. "Really screwed up."

"Paul. I need a favor," Jesus says.

"What is it?"

"I need you to fill in for me."

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't think I can go through it again. This cross is too much for me to bear."

"You want me to . . ."

"Die on the cross."

Turn off the radio. "You . . . you're broken."

"Please! It won't hurt you like it does me," Jesus says.

Reach out for your briefcase.

"I'd do it for you," Jesus says, and then He disappears with a click and a latch.

RESET THE SYSTEM

Nobody is home. The house is a mess; gadgets and toys litter the floor, papers and magazines are spread across the couch, and the holovision is on. A red panda is reciting the alphabet as you push a path to the sofa and clear a spot to sit down.

"A is for apple, B is for buy, C is for cat . . ." the panda says as he rides a steam train down cartoon tracks.

Sit on the couch and watch the holograph teach civics for toddlers. Wonder where your family has gone. Maybe they went into space without you.

Lean back on the couch, close your eyes, and then jump forward again as a voice squeals out behind you.

"Ooooh! Honey!" The sound of gears turning is followed by another recorded message. "Oh, bother!"

Reach behind the sofa cushion and pull out a Winnie-the-Pooh talking doll. Squeeze the toy and watch his nose spin and his eyes light up.

"Whhiirrr . . . ooooh! Honey!" Pooh says.

How did you get to this point? You don't recognize this mess you live in; it doesn't have a thing to do with you. The hotel rooms you stay in seem more connected to your actual life than this green plastic couch, these simulated pine floors.

You squeeze Pooh around the middle, and his eyes light up. His nose twitches. "Ooooh! Half a pot is better than nothing," Pooh says. "Time for a little something. Ooooh! Bother! Time for nothing. Honey. Oooh. Hon-hon-hon-hon-nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing . . ."

The toy is malfunctioning.

Pooh's nose spins and spins, his eyes keep flashing, as he repeats this last word over and over again.

Everything in your life is malfunctioning: your kids' toys, your job, your empty house, and even Jesus Christ. Everything has a bug in it, and nothing is hooked up the way it should be.

Pooh keeps spinning and whirring until you wedge him between the sofa cushions in an effort to muffle the speaker in his back.

"... nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing . . ."

Maybe it wasn't your pitch that was the problem. Maybe your problems stem from the bug in His system. How can you make a sale when you can't give a proper demonstration?

"... nothingnothingnothingnothing . . ."

Pull Pooh out from behind the sofa cushion, turn him on his belly, and pull out his batteries. Then grab your briefcase, pop it open, and hit the reset button.

DON'T GET IN THE POOL

Stan is doing laps in the motel's heated pool. His round stomach and broad shoulders make waves as he sinks and surfaces back and forth in front of you. You're standing on the concrete rim and peering out at him from underneath an umbrella. It is raining in Idaho.

"Mr. Loper?" you ask. "Do you have a minute? I have a problem."

"I'm swimming," Stan tells you. "I'm enjoying myself . . . I'm not a goddamn neurotic like the rest of you. I'm swimming," Stan says. He stops in the middle of the pool, brushes his gray hair back over his bald spot, and looks around. Water droplets spray from his head as he peers back and forth.

"Mr. Loper, when you're through . . ."

"Why don't any of you want to swim? It's a heated pool!" he shouts. He paddles over to the rim and pulls himself out, grunting, onto the side. He shakes himself off and then gingerly steps past you to his door.

"Mr. Loper, my Jesus AI is on the fritz . . . my demonstrator is buggy," you tell him.

"I'm glad you could join us again, Dart. You feeling better?" he asks.

"I . . ."

"I hope so, because to me it looks like you're sinking. Last year you were my number two salesman, and now you . . . you've lost your way, Paul." He steps into his motel room, and you follow him. "If things don't pick up for you here in Boise, you won't be joining us in California," Loper says.

He heads toward the bathroom and pulls off his trunks. His broad backside flashes out at you as he flings his waterlogged shorts into the shower stall.

Turn away; get out of there.

"Paul! Where are you going? Goddamn neurotic, turn around!" he shouts.

"Sir?"

Loper is standing before you naked. He is dangling there and drying his face with a towel.

"Drop your system by my room. I'll take a look at it tonight, and if I can't fix it, then you can use my demonstrator tomorrow," he tells you. "What are you looking at?"

"Well, I . . . sir?"

"Get out of here, Dart!"

EAT YOUR OATMEAL

George Kent is the only salesman still at the motel when you get to breakfast. You are carrying Loper's suitcase, his VR demonstrator, pulling it by a strap, letting it roll along behind you.

"This machine is ancient," you tell Kent as you sit down across from him in the booth. "When was the last time Loper actually hit the doors with this model?"

George Kent is an older man, probably pushing sixty. He always wears the same gray suit, always wears the same black fedora. He's an old-timer, a salesman's salesman, and he isn't much into small talk.

"It'll work for you. You just tell them that their system will be even better than your demonstrator. Tell them what the new features will be and stick to the standard demo, don't try to make that box do anything fancy. You'll do fine," he tells you.

"It's heavy."

Kent swipes at his eggs with a piece of sourdough toast, munches thoughtfully on the softened bread, and swallows. Call out to the waitress. Order coffee and a bowl of oatmeal.

"Any hash browns with that?" the waitress asks.

"With a bowl of oatmeal?" you ask back.

"Any hash browns?" the waitress repeats.

"No, I don't want hash browns with my oatmeal."

"Thank you, sir," the girl says.

"What was that?" you ask Kent, who is smiling after the waitress, watching her as she drops off your order and then sits down at the counter and opens a newspaper.

"She's just like you, isn't she, Paul?" Kent asks.

"How's that?"

"Well, neither of you can really be bothered to focus on the job. Neither of you can give an appropriate pitch," he says.

"Oh, you too? You're going to give me this crap too?"

Kent turns back to his plate, methodically sweeping his toast across the yolk and stuffing small pieces into his mouth.

"I still sell books. Did you know that, Paul? Did you even know we still carry books?" he asks.

"You sell books. . . . Great."

"Some people want to feel paper. Some older folks, and even some young people, enjoy holding a quality edition of the King James Bible in their hands. And I can accommodate that desire," Kent tells you.

"There's no money in book sales," you tell him.

"There's no money in trying to sell people something they don't want. My VR sales are fine, solid. But I also sell books," Kent says, and he takes a sip of coffee.

"That's great, George. But so what?"

"You've lost your edge, Paul. You don't know what you're doing out there. I've been waiting for you. We're going to hit the doors together today," he tells you.

Take a sip of coffee. It's cold.

"We're getting a late start, but I think we can make it work," Kent tells you.

"Who gets the commission?" you ask.

"You're being trained, Paul. This is a training day."

"You get it?"

"Hurry up with your oatmeal. We should be out of here by eleven."

"Christ!"

Kent just looks at you. He pushes his plate aside, apparently finished with his egg scraping, and folds his hands in his lap. "Hurry up."

PHONE HOME

Stand in a phone booth outside the motel. Watch Kent loading up his station wagon with equipment; watch him wobble as he heaves Loper's demonstrator into the back of the Volkswagen and closes the hatch.

"Rebecca? I'm in Boise." Focus on the phone receiver. Try not to picture your wife on the other end of the line.

"Are you feeling better?"

"No. I'm not better. At least, Loper doesn't think I'm better. I'm being trained today. I've been in this business for nearly a decade, and they think I need to be trained."

Your wife is just breathing into the phone, and you wonder why you bothered to call her. Kent is standing by the passenger door of his station wagon and tapping his foot. He makes a big ordeal out of looking at his watch and whistles to you.

"I want to go into space," you say finally.

"Honey, you should listen to them. Your sales have been dropping, and I can't make enough money with the little bit of work I pick up . . . and there's the kids' schooling to think of. I

mean, you don't want to send them to public school, do you?" your wife asks.

"We'll get a voucher," you tell her. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Oh, honey . . . you can't be serious about the colonies, not this late in the game. Maybe you should just listen to them. I know you can do it," she tells you.

Kent is getting into the driver's seat. He starts the motor, and his wagon starts spitting fumes.

"Rebecca, I don't think I can keep doing this."

"You have to, Paul. I'm counting on you. We're counting on you."

TRY SABOTAGE

"Why don't we use my machine?" Kent asks, and slaps his briefcase.

"But I thought that I would . . ." you start.

"You should just watch," Kent says.

The customers, a pasty-faced computer programmer and his Catholic wife, are standing by the control panel of their VR studio. Kent turns to them and winks conspiratorially. "This is a training day for Paul," he explains.

"You're new?" the husband asks.

"No, I'm old," you tell him. "I'm too old."

"Well, this is a good system, but some older programs have trouble when we try to play them. Is your Bible compatible with system forty-two?" the wife asks.

"I'll check."

Take Kent's briefcase, pop it open, and quickly adjust it. Link Kent's AI with a hypertext document about Jesus in the twentieth century. Set the parameters of the Virtual Bible to the most flexible settings. Do it quickly, with just a few keystrokes, and then hand the briefcase back to Kent.

Tell the customers that the VR Bible will work just fine on their system. Tell them that the software is compatible.

Watch as Kent connects his briefcase to the primary control panel, and then when everything is set and ready to go, start to worry.

What were you thinking?

You weren't thinking anything, it was a spontaneous act of sabotage. In just a few seconds, you have destroyed Kent's chance to make a sale. In fact, if his system responds to the new settings like yours did, you may have destroyed Kent's career.

"What's your favorite Bible story?" Kent asks.

"Spartacus."

"Bob, that's not a Bible story," the wife says.

"Oh, umm . . . how about the Last Supper? Can we see the Last Supper?"

George nods and types in the command.

WAVE TO JESUS

Jesus and his followers are at a truck stop. The disciples look like a biker gang. Decked out in leather jackets and spiked wrist bands, they are smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and talking about the end of the world.

Jesus looks biblical, but only just barely. He's wearing a white bathrobe and a crown cut out of yellow construction paper.

Simon sticks two fingers in his mouth and lets out a long, loud whistle. "Everybody shut up, the Lord our Savior is going

to make a speech.”

George is wide-eyed. He’s standing by the control panel, which in the simulation appears as a rotating pie display, and punching in commands furiously. “I’m sorry about this,” he tells the customers. “This isn’t how the program usually runs.”

“It’s fine. Interesting,” the wife tells him. She’s dressed as a waitress. Uniformed in pink, she approaches the table and offers the Lord a refill of coffee.

“Not now,” Christ tells her.

George keeps punching at the pies. He opens the display case and reaches in. His hands sink into Key lime pie, apple pie, cream. Then he reaches up and touches his head. He’s trying to take off his VR headset, but he ends up smearing cherries and whipped cream on his temples instead.

“Pause the program,” you suggest.

“I can’t find the headset. This reality is too coherent,” George says.

Try giving the command yourself, and then watch as the characters keep moving.

“Do I have everyone’s attention?” Jesus asks. The disciples shift on their vinyl cushions and slowly break off their conversations. “I know that none of you really care that I’m going to die tomorrow, but if you’d be so kind as to fake it, I’d like to tell you something.”

“Sorry, Jesus,” Judas says.

“You should be. Now listen. This is important. I’m not going through with it,” Jesus says.

There is a pause, during which the only sound is George tapping his fingers against glass.

“Wait a second. That’s not right. No, no . . . aren’t you supposed to accuse us? I mean, I’ve already betrayed you,” Judas says.

“No. I don’t care what you did, I’m not going through with it. If you want to talk about crucifixion or the Father or any of that, you’ll have to talk to my replacement,” Christ says.

“Who? Who is going to replace you? Who is glorious enough to warrant—”

“Oh, it’s just some guy. There he is at the counter,” Jesus points at you, and as the disciples turn and stare, Christ gives you a little wave. “Hi, Paul!” Jesus says.

Wave back to him.

“Hi,” you say. “Ummm . . .”

WATCH THE ROAD AGAIN

The road to California, to Los Angeles, is surrounded by the myths and legends of the commodity, and if you were to take your hands from the steering wheel, you’d find that your Astro-900 Studebaker could navigate this path on its own. Out here among the soda pop and menstrual pads your car just glides along, following a straight line toward the next motel.

Lean over into the back seat and pop open your briefcase. Ask Him, “Why did I do that? Why did I sabotage Kent’s system? Why did I demand that Stan return you, you who are at best a malfunctioning savior, to my side?”

Jesus just smiles. His robes flapping along the side door and

out the passenger window, He leans back and lets out a laugh.

“You must have missed me,” Jesus explains. “Or maybe you want to go through with it. Maybe you’re just dying to take my place.”

“Why should I want that? Why should I need that?” you ask.

“You’ve got some sort of complex. But don’t worry, everybody does these days,” Jesus explains. “It’s my fault. I wanted to set an example, but it just ended up being a distraction. I’m sorry. I should have known better.”

“I want to be you,” you say. “That’s the crazy truth, isn’t it?”

“I’ll fix it. Don’t worry. That’s why I’m here.”

TEST THE PRODUCT

Reroute your demonstrator so that every subroutine is linked to the hypertext document on Jesus in the twentieth century. Plug your briefcase into the motel’s holovision and put on the VR headset.

Turn on your Bible.

“Are you the King of the Jews?” Pontius Pilate asks. He is sitting above you in the mezzanine of the coliseum. He is shouting down to you, but you don’t shout back. All around, a crowd of Israelites, your people, are yelling for blood.

“Crucify him!”

“Are you the Son of sons, the King of kings?” Pilate shouts the question down.

“Pause program.”

The scene stops. Pilate freezes in place, and the crowd of Pharisees and peasants stands still. You can’t go through with it.

“Recalibrate with subject as Pontius Pilate,” you instruct the computer. “Resume.”

“Crucify him!” your people shout. They are still your people,

“Everybody shut up, the Lord our savior is going to make a speech.”

Pontius Pilate is still above you, although now he’s walking down to the edge of the balcony, moving closer so he won’t have to shout.

“Flog him,” Pilate says.

“Pause program!” But the simulation keeps running. Your arms and legs are held tight, stretched, by two Roman guards. The whip comes down hard and quick on your back, and tiny hooks on the straps dig in. Your flesh opens up.

One stroke.

“Pause program! Pause!” you shout.

Two strokes, three, four . . .

“This isn’t real! This isn’t real! It’s a simulation!” you scream. Shake your head back and forth, rock back and forth against the pull of the guards. Try to fling the VR headset from your scalp.

One of the Roman guards walks up to you and grabs your face as you scream in pain. “It’s me,” He says.

“Jesus?”

The guard nods slowly and then leans in toward you and whispers. “My mistake was dying for other people.”

“What does that—” you start to ask, but the whip comes

down hard. "Make it stop!"

"People have to die for their own sins. Ordinary people have to escape the karmic cycle under their own steam. I can't keep carrying this load for them," Jesus tells you, and then steps back and disappears in the crowd.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks.

The coliseum is jammed, flooded, with people. Not just peasants and Pharisees now, but accountants, insurance salesmen, telemarketers, construction workers, legal assistants, secretaries, and so on. . . .

The people are calling for more blood.

"Crucify him!"

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks.

"That's what everyone thinks," you reply. Run your fingers back and forth through your hair, meticulously hunt down the metal strap of the headset. It isn't there.

Pilate reaches into his robes and pulls out a holographic postcard. A kitschy flip-card that shifts back and forth as he turns it in the sun. First there is a projection of a white-bread Jesus bowing in prayer, and then there is an image of the enlightened Christ. This second Christ looks off to the side, his chest open and glowing red, his heart ringed by thorns and topped by a flaming cross.

"Do you understand what this is a symbol for?" Pilate asks. He turns the card back and forth so the image keeps changing.

"Jesus," you reply. "Before, and then after the crucifixion."

"Wrong," Pilate says. "This is a picture of the human condition. First we see a man caught up in psychological time, caught up in the world and all the things he wants to achieve, to become. And then we see what it is to be outside time, to give up becoming, to give up being, in order to have a totally open heart and mind," Pilate says. "Do you see it?" He flips the card back and forth: Jesus staring. Jesus praying. Jesus staring. Jesus praying. Back and forth.

"I still see Jesus," you tell Pilate.

"Crucify him!"

"Why? What evil has he done?" Pilate asks the crowd.

And the crowd starts to chant out sins—not your sins, but the sins of the world.

"What about Nazi Germany?"

"What about the atom bomb?"

"What about junk mail, voice mail, email, and letter bombs?"

"What about air conditioning, and electric blankets, and Dresden, and Vietnam?"

"What about cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and the war on drugs?"

"What about television?"

"What has he done, what evil?" Pilate asks again.

"Crucify him. Because of television and the war on drugs!"

"Do you understand what this hologram signifies?" Pilate asks. This time he doesn't show you a postcard but merely points to the coliseum, to the crowd.

"I just think this has gotten out of hand," you reply. "I can't die for you . . . for your sins. Jesus told me that we have to do it for ourselves!" you shout out to the crowd.

"But what about you? What about your sins? What about junk mail and the atom bomb?" Pilate asks.

"I can't do this!" you cry, but nobody listens.

HANG FROM THE CROSS

They pound in the nails. They pound the nails through your wrists, ankles, and hands . . . they are doing a thorough job of it. Again, despite your commands, the program keeps running. The pain is tremendous.

Hang from the cross. Try not to cry.

"This can't be happening. My God! Why are you doing this to me?"

Open your eyes. Look down, through trickles of blood, at the dust. Despite the pain, you are still curious. Look down and find that the yellow sand of the desert is gone, and in its place there is a layer of bone-white dust. Try to ignore the pull of the thorns on your scalp and look up at the landscape.

It is the Moon. The colony, a tiny bubble of glass perched on the edge of the horizon, shimmers with the reflection of distant stars.

You've made it to the Moon, but only for an instant. The lunar surface quickly fades, the landscape keeps changing.

Hang on the cross and bleed while a barrage of sins, both small and large, passes before your eyes.

Find yourself attached to a Lincoln convertible. Witness the assassination of John F. Kennedy and then blink and stare at your childhood home. Watch yourself watch television.

Witness the bombing of Hiroshima.

Watch your childhood self lose a game of dodgeball.

Stare at hordes of refugees, hundreds of thousands of them, aimlessly wandering through a desert landscape.

Watch an adolescent Paul Dart purposely lose his orthodontic retainer during his lunch period.

Bulldozers pile up bodies.

A boy hides his sixth-grade report card.

Hang on the cross. Witness each sin, feel each pain.

"Oh God! Forgive me . . . us . . . them. We didn't know. I didn't know."

Die.

DISCOVER THE ROBOT CHRIST

Wake up when Loper cuts the power to the motel's VR system.

Open your eyes to find yourself wrapped in a shroud and levitating in darkness and then shut your eyes again as light from the outside hall pours into the tomb.

Bellyflop onto the orange carpet of your motel room.

Stare up at Stan Loper's red-and-blue striped swimming trunks, and try to catch your breath.

"Wha?" you say. There is hardly enough air in you to make a sound. "What . . . are . . . you . . . doing?"

"I talked to Kent," Loper says.

For a moment you don't understand what he means. Kent? Who is Kent? Get to your feet and slowly take off your VR headset. Try to let your present circumstances, your supposed real identity, sink in. "What did Kent say?"

Stan just stands next to the holovision and drips on the orange carpet. He is shivering. The air conditioning in your unit is on full blast. "You're through, Paul. It's over," Loper says.

"I'll get you a towel."

"No, no, no. Listen to me, you're fired. Understand? You're done."

Nod, and then get up and go to the linen closet. The towels

are clean and white.

"I want you gone," Stan says. He dries his hair and then wraps the towel around his middle.

Tell him that you don't want to leave yet. Tell him that you feel that you have to stay a little while longer. Tell him you want to talk to the crew.

He doesn't understand. He doesn't listen.

"Nothing you say can change what has happened, Paul," Loper says.

But what has happened?

Look at your hands and feet. Inspect your ankles and wrists. There are no stigmata, no physical evidence.

"Can I keep my demonstrator?" you ask.

"What?"

"I just want to see it . . . Him . . . one more time," you say.

Find your briefcase sitting on top of the holovision.

"What were you doing in here, Paul? What was that simulation you were running?"

"I'll show you," you say.

"No. Don't open that. Stop right there. That's property of Media Voyages Incorporated, and—"

Open your briefcase.

Jesus looks okay, biblical. "The meek shall inherit the Earth," a squeaky-clean holographic Jesus tells you. "Pick up your bed and walk."

He's not there anymore. It's just an artificial Christ, a robot Jesus. It's nothing.

"Turn off that projector. Now!" Loper says.

Shut the briefcase and turn it around so that the handle faces out. Hand it over to Loper; shove it into his grasp and knock him off his center.

"Here, take it! I don't need it. I don't need Him anymore."

WALK ON WATER

The sun feels good on your neck and face.

Stare out past the porch's wooden railing at the sales crew—George, and Will, and Mike, and Dan—as they sluggishly splash back and forth in the motel pool.

Take a dab of gel on your tongue and let it burn there for a minute. Swallow, then walk toward the pool.

Pull up a lawn chair, a moldy recliner with broken straps, and set it down next to the edge of the pool. Sit down on the outer frame of the recliner and try to catch George's eye. He's about a foot away from you, holding onto the metal ladder and staring down at his feet.

"George, I want you to know I don't blame you."

"Hi, Paul," George says.

"It was going to happen either way," you tell him.

"I can't really . . ."

"What?"

"I can't really swim. Stan wanted us to, but I can't . . ."

Help Kent get out of the pool. Steady him as he pulls himself up and rolls onto the concrete.

"It's a phobic reaction," George says. He's lying on his stomach next to the pool. He's talking to the ground. "I can't help it."

Sit down on one of the more intact recliners along the fence. Stare at the grass beneath your feet, at the yellow stalks along the perimeter of the concrete.

"I've given up selling," you say.

George takes a pack of nicotine cigarettes out of his briefcase and lights up. "Hmm . . ." He takes a deep drag on his cigarette and rubs his towel along his neck and chest. "That's good, Paul. It wasn't for you," George says.

"I can't stand it. It's everywhere. The pool, for instance, was originally part of some contract. Or, better yet—those colored lights on the trees. Have you seen them? The trees out along the main path? They've got colored lights on them. Somebody thought that would improve things, improve the trees," you say.

George doesn't respond, but just keeps sucking on his nicotine cigarette and staring at the sky.

"I want you to go out with me today, George," you tell him.

"What?"

"I want to train you today," you say.

"I thought Loper was going to . . . I thought he . . ."

You nod in agreement. "He did. He fired me. I'm not talking about selling Bibles. I've seen things, George. I've been through things, my demonstrator was on the fritz and it showed me things. . . . I want you to go out there with me today."

George nods at you, seemingly in agreement. He stands up, stubs out his cigarette, and walks back toward the edge of the pool. Nodding all the time, George turns away from you and strides gingerly down the steps into the shallow end of the pool.

■ ■ ■

Your Studebaker is hot; the vinyl stings your legs even through your polyester slacks. Roll down the windows and turn on the air conditioning as you back up into the parking lot.

Today you're looking forward to hitting the doors.

Clear your throat and look up at the rearview mirror. Adjust the mirror so you can see your reflection, your uneven eyes. Give yourself a winning smile and clear your throat.

But you don't have a pitch, you don't have anything to rehearse. Push the mirror back into place and roll out onto the road. 🚗



About the author

Douglas Lain's short stories, essays, rants, and agitprop have appeared in a variety of obscure journals, magazines, and pamphlets as well as on telephone poles and bus station walls all over Oregon.

This is his second piece for AMAZING Stories.

As an explanation for this story, Lain reports that he has worked as a door-to-door canvasser for an environmental group, a petition gatherer for several initiative campaigns, and as a fundraiser for the Death with Dignity campaign. He currently works as a telemarketer for the Oregon Symphony.



About the illustrator

IN RICK SEALOCK'S OWN "WILD" WORDS: "I was raised in the WILDS of Alberta, Canada. I then attended the WILD Alberta College of Art and Design. After a WILD, WILD time there, I graduated to take on the WILD, WILD, WILD world of illustration. I have received over a hundred and some awards for WILD illustrations. It's a WILD, WILD ride!!!! P.S. I have a WILD WILD wife who is even more wild!!! Rawhide!"

REQUIEM

WITH INTERRUPTIONS



*First, an accident.
Then, a misunderstanding.
Now she's dying, and she
doesn't know why.*

BY G. SCOTT HUGGINS

THE STATESMAN

THE TRAVELER

SAILOR

You writhe free from Delusion into what you call the Elastic Place again and nearly Shave in despair, before you remember. The Delusion is worse than here, and Shaving might send you back there. You permit yourself only a quiet shudder as the Things begin to form in the darkness and float past. You know some. Most are horribly alien. All are, somehow, tinged Human.

This place, like the stars, belongs to the Humans. All things, it seems, belong to them. Perhaps their strange impriests (priests who work without metal) are right, and their gods do indeed punish all those who do not believe in them. But that would mean you are dead.

Souldread Impossible. The souldread are simply gone.

Onto the Humans know what the priests do not?

It cannot be true. You will not let it be true. Perhaps this time, the Elastic Place will stay real. Almost without thinking, now, you begin to harvest the Things, and change them; Human under your hands softens, becomes Samour. Very few of them ever fight, and those that do can be dropped. Whatever they are, the Things have little in the way of will.

And now you are building a home into the Elastic Place, even though sometimes you see the towers of your home move, and the trees wobble. But now you have brought your own mate here, and the Elastic Place is only an unpleasant party until finally you hold your mate and you try as hard as you can to see precisely what she is trying and then it all gives too far and tears. You have time only for fear before Delusion rises up like a great storm to sweep and everything you know.

ILLUSTRATION BY
THOM ANG

FOR ONE MOMENT, when he sees me, Sandor's face lights up from across the restaurant and he waves. Halfway there, his smile fades, and I know I must look bad. I thought it was bad enough each morning, in the mirror. Here it is worse.

"Jesus, Emily, it's good to see you," he says. Still, his voice sounds anything but good. Probably no wonder, even though I know I look better than I did a month ago. I pull out the heavy wooden chair and nearly fall. The lack of sleep is starting to take its toll, the doctor in me says, but I catch myself and sit down.

"It's good to see you too, Sandor," I say. "You're looking well." In his case, it is true. Space-tanned skin, curly hair, mustache. "How's work on the Lattice coming?"

"I'm hurt you had to ask." He smiles. "Didn't you see the difference on your way in? I've got stories. . . ." He stops himself. "But first, I'm starved, and if you're not, you ought to be, after what I've heard about your tour. Let's get the food on the way." He begins to try in his choices. I lift the menu and have just decided what to order when Sandor takes my right hand.

I flinch, but he just pulls away as he stands in a pinch, when given of some things. He points to the outbills and rules fingers where the rules are missing. His eyes are dark when he looks at me. "Good God, Emily, you never told me about this. But . . . why is it so deadly?"

I read, and the notion is clear.

Sandor's face fades into the vertiginous, multiple realities of the sick boy, multidimensional and spinning the air around me as my voice rises in agony and another alien rises to sign to me, breathe from peace, or worry and I'm fighting, fighting to get back to . . .

"Em? Em?" Sandor is saying, and I come back, looking at my snow-white hands. The dreams are starting to intrude even when I am awake. I know what they are. I had been planning on reconstructive surgery, of course, but there's no point, now.

"I'm not a surgeon anymore, Sandor."

His mouth freezes open for a moment. "What? But why? There wasn't a radiation flash or anything. Not because of this . . .?"

"I just got the word today," I begin. And, dammit, I hadn't been going to ruin this; we hardly ever get to see each other anymore, but he knows about the accident, and so now I have to tell him. Might as well get it over with; everyone will know soon enough.

"My brain is degenerating." I rush the words out. "Looks like an Alzheimer's variant, but it isn't responding to treatment.

But then the door bursts open and you are falling, the floor sliding away, only it is not a floor but a deck, and you are back on the Human ship, and a giant is on you, Human, and she wields shining swords of metal.

Metal. You had not known the Humans were soulkillers.

You raise your hands in desperate, useless defense and find a war-blade in them. You parry, but the singing metal splinters your glass blade and you know an instant of terror—beyond-death—and then Delusion reaches up and swallows you effortlessly.

I SIT UP, gasping, out of the nightmare. Horrible shapes are all around me, alien shapes, but I know, I know, that if I can just hold on for a moment it will sort itself out.

There. I am me again.

Why am I fighting Humans in my dreams? Why am I wield-

WHY AM I FIGHTING HUMANS

Brainwaves going all over the place. That's why I . . . blanked out just now. I don't know—no one knows how long, but it's starting to progress pretty rapidly." I stop. There is nothing else to say.

And Sandor, being the good friend that he is, says nothing, and holds my hands, my ugly, pointless hands, until the silence passes and the meal comes.

PRIEST WINGS-OVER-SUN finished his fifth glass of the brown, stinging sugar water and released some of the gas back into the air. He was not sure why the Humans seated on either side of him had turned their primeyes—no, just eyes, he reminded himself; Humans had no overeye, poor things—to look at him, nor what the motions of their faces, sliding grotesquely over their skulls, meant. Nothing good for a lone Sunone, he was sure.

He considered asking a crewmember for another serving of the drink, but decided against it—the shuttle was nearly to the station, and he had enough sugar stored to last him through many long conversations.

He told himself again that anger served no purpose, but the advice did little good. These Humans with their soft skins and barely detectable vibrating speech and repulsive faces had caused the souldeath of one of his Entrusted. They had been warned. They had been warned by the dead one's mate, but they had not listened. Now Wings-Over-Sun had a letter of apology from someone in the Human navy, who, as far as he could tell, had not even been aboard the ship. He also had a widow to bring home and comfort as best he could. All things considered, it was enough for anger. And fear.

It is becoming easier to maintain the balance, and you almost succeed in believing that Delusion is over, that it was never real to begin with, and that the Elastic Place is solid. It does appear to be solid in some places—the least terrifying ones, where you spend the most time. You smell the odors of a meal and try to remember the last time you tasted sugar.

ing a sword of glass? Why does the thought of metal terrify me? The answers, surely so obvious, slide away with the rest of the Elastic Place (where did that phrase come from?) and leave me . . . where? Here.

It is not my apartment.

I am lying on a long couch, with a thin, brown blanket over me. Clashing bits of memorabilia line the walls. Short and long Japanese swords. A Russian wall hanging in bright reds and greens. Maps of Earth and its colonies. A man's room. Sandor. Memory begins to return, in the faltering manner I am getting used to. I am still wearing the clothes I met him in.

"Are you all right, Em?" Sandor is standing in the hall by the clock. Four. I've been asleep almost three hours. Almost a record for the past week.

"Don't you have to be at work?" I ask.

"I keep my own hours a lot these days. You fell asleep in the tram."

"You . . ." A portion of my sleep-fuzzed mind springs into focus. "You carried me here." How ridiculous-looking. But it is a chill image. How long before I have to be carried everywhere? Before someone has to feed me? Before . . . I clamp down on the thought. That way lies madness, on an even faster path than the one I am already on.

"You want to talk about it?" he says.

"No," I say automatically, but the look on his face tells me I will speak. If not now, then sometime.

"It's all . . . dreams," I say. "Like dreams coming to life and life turning to a dream. Sometimes I . . . can't tell where they break apart."

"What do you dream about?" He sits in the papasan opposite me. "The blowout?"

I look at him sharply, and he raises his hands in mock protection. "That's about when this began, isn't it? It'd be a miracle if you didn't dream it."

"It always starts out the same," I say. "I'm somewhere alien. I see dreams, like things floating past, and they're alien, too. So I pick them up and try to make them . . . right, to make them

mine. But they already are. Then I notice that I'm the alien, and the aliens are Humans. But I'm fighting the alien."

"The aliens that are Humans or the aliens that are aliens?"

"Yes. Neither. Both." A laugh fights its way to the surface and breaks bitterly. "I don't know. And I've got these heavy glass blades because metal is too deadly, and I really hope she doesn't touch me, because I'll die."

Sandor's raised eyebrows say it all. "Dammit, I know it doesn't make sense!" I yell. "I don't make sense anymore; my dreams don't." He says nothing. Absolutely calm, and I can't stand it. "And you sure as hell don't, either, Sandor," I add. "Why did you even bring me here?"

He opens his mouth, pauses, and then says, "You needed to be taken somewhere. And I don't know where you live these days. What else?"

IN MY DREAMS?

He'd been going to say something else, but I was too tired to dig.

"It's either that or I'm back on the *Thuy Kieu*. Sometimes both."

He leans back to listen, and I have no choice but to begin the story.

THE METEOR STRIKE was a nightmare that shouldn't have been; the point from which I could measure all subsequent nightmares. It had come in too fast for countermeasures, and punctured us in a line right through the passengers' quarters into the main rotation gear. We lost gravity instantly.

I didn't think we'd have very much work ahead of us. I know that sounds cold, but that's the way it is. Punctures usually don't leave much in the way of injuries, but we'd been lucky, in a way. No one had been in either of the outer compartments, and the emergency bulkheads had sealed almost instantly. Only one spacer was sucked out.

But there was a dining room—a *wood-paneled* dining room—full of passengers between those two bulkheads.

Five minutes after arriving in sick bay, I was pulling splinters out of a spacer's belly, trying to get a zero-g IV into place, while my midshipmen tried to keep the air between me and my patient free of the mists and drops of blood that floated around the cabin like a sick snowstorm.

I started sewing the man up, but halfway through, a rating arrived, calling, "Eetee case, complications! Who's on it?"

I didn't want it, but it was ultimately my responsibility; we had no alien specialists on board. "Finish," I barked at my aides. "Bring him here." I shoved the cot aside and braced myself to catch the new one.

"God, what is it?" Whatever it was, it was hideous. I hoped blue was its natural color. That was better than the alternative—that it was cyanotic. The surface of its head was one great, shiny cap, like a compound eye, except in the front where two smaller eyes, a knife-thin nose, and a jointed jaw made up a kind of face. It was bilaterally symmetrical with thin limbs and thick

digits. The chest was spouting globules of deep purple blood from one large splinter. I could cut it out without too much trouble. The ultrasound was showing no surprises. I could almost have pulled it out, except for one large barb.

The being was obviously in pain; a patch on its throat glowed red and white alternately, and it was struggling. The rating and I tied its limbs down. I didn't dare use an anesthetic. I was just positioning my scalpel when my arm was jerked around.

It was another of the aliens, flailing wildly, trying to keep its balance in zero-g. I tried to grip its hand in mine, but it tore loose, signing, «No cut. No touch, not with metal. You cannot. You kill.»

It was using Sameslan, of course. Bad Sameslan. While anyone can learn to read Anglic, almost no alien races have vocal cords capable of reproducing it. We can't reproduce their languages either. But most of them have limbs that can approximate the gestures of the sign language invented by our own deaf, so it's the interstellar lingua franca—and probably will be until we run into someone with more ships or a better idea. No one travels interstellar without learning at least a little of it.

In this being's case, *very* little. Nevertheless, a wave of relief swept over me at her words. «You are a doctor?»

«No. Wife of him. You cannot cut. We have Healer. Healer comes.»

Thank God. I signed as slowly as I dared: «Where is the healer? Please hurry.»

«Healer on our world. Husband must go back.»

My hope was replaced by disgust. We were already at least one jump from this being's home system. She didn't understand even the basics of star travel. «If I do not cut, he will die,» I signed slowly. «He will not live until your doctor comes.»

«Not doctor. Healer. Priest. Only priest can cut with metal, or . . .»—she fumbled a few gestures—« . . . he will die. Forever.» The patch on her throat was cycling through all the colors of the spectrum.

Then I understood. She had already given him up. Wanted him uncontaminated for whatever next life they believed in. Such courage, so misguided.

There was a good chance her mate would die anyway. The ultrasound showed no surprises, but there was a lot of damage inside. All I could do was sew him up and hope for the best.

A crazy part of my mind muttered that it might be more merciful to do as she asked. It would be easy to let him go. No one would blame me for it, and there were plenty of Human casualties that needed attention. . . . I was instantly ashamed. How could I even think this way? I didn't consider myself a racist, yet here I was, considering putting this . . . life out of its misery because it wasn't human. Religion was not an issue.

"Get her out of here," I told the rating, my harshness fueled by my own guilt. He picked her up in his powerful arms and kicked off. She struggled, her throat flashing so brightly I could see the light reflecting off the far walls. My scalpel was in my hand. I checked once more for signs of any hidden blood vessels I might damage. Nothing. Just one swift cut . . .

The world exploded into pain and blue fire.

SANDOR IS WATCHING ME, his mouth slightly open, as I finish my story. "I woke up in one of my own beds with my hands

bandaged. They had to restart my heart twice. The patient actually lived. But he went into a coma and never came out. A closer scan showed he had a kind of defense system, like an electric eel's—a very powerful conduction system right below the skin."

I struggle to keep my thoughts focused. Through the retelling of the story I have felt them slipping away, trying to slide off to the side and out the door. Sandor's words bring me back.

"Look, I have some leave coming up, and you're going to need to make plans . . . for what's coming." He has trouble getting the words out. "I'd like to help."

"No, that's okay," I say automatically. "You don't want to use up your time because of me, and what can you do, anyway?" I say it lightly, but I see him flinch. "You know, Mom will be coming up soon, and there's a lot to plan and . . ."

"And I'd just be in the way," he says, his face blank. "I know. It's all right. I'm sure you've got a lot of people who'll be there. Call if you need me." He rises to go to the kitchen. Soon he will offer to take me home, and this will be the last time we'll see each other.

And Andrea is on assignment. Kirill and Janesha both looked frightened when I called them, mouthed variants on "I'm-so-sorry-Em-call-if-I-can-help-good-bye." And I haven't even called my mother, but I will have to sometime. I hate being helped by anyone, but most of all her, and by the time she's here, there'll be no one else.

As long as no one is helping me yet, I can still feel like I'm going to live. And I know I am being foolish.

I make myself say it: "Sandor. I'd appreciate your help."

WINGS-OVER-SUN drew the cloak around himself, high over his head to shield his overeye from the garish Human colors. It was unlikely that anyone would try to bespeak him here unless they were already in front of him, and the large compound eye that covered the back of his head was very sensitive. Using only his two simple primeyes, he felt almost blind. Was this how Humans were forced to see? He looked at that moment far more like an old, blue-skinned, Human man than he would have cared to acknowledge.

The Humans seemed anxious to avoid him, even in the press that exited from the lander. He was just as grateful. The three balanced soulprobes in the quiver at his back were fragile. He

almost as soon as she had bowed. [*You may rise, Horizon-At-Noon. I thank you for your prompt greeting.*]

[*I apologize for my haste, Wings-Over-Sun. I am grateful you have come. We entrust ourselves to your justice.*]

His anger flared again. He knew her; knew that the love between her and her mate had been strong. She had not yet let go. It would have been better if they were alone, so that she could share her grief, and he his knowledge and reassurance.

[*I fear that justice may be a long time coming. I wish it were not so, but Humans are ignorant of many things. They do not listen to us. I have come to take you home, and to speak with them, so that this thing will not happen again.*] It was then that he noticed the Human woman standing behind his Entrusted, watching them both.

She was not very much taller than they were, which was saying something. Obviously female—Human sexual dimorphism was disgusting. One of the truly pallid ones—dark hair with a white streak through it.

[*What is that doing here?*]

The Human's arms and hands moved. Her face remained still, and she gave no vibration. Belatedly, he recognized Sameslan. «I am your interpreter. Horizon-At-Noon hired me to assist you both. You will kindly refer to me as 'she,' at least in my presence. Do you understand?»

Wings-Over-Sun stared stupidly. Impossible that she could have seen. [*No Human can understand our speech.*]

The corners of the Human's mouth moved upward slightly. «All Humans are not 'ignorant.' Speak slowly. I am still learning. If you continue to hire me, it may be easier for you to use Sameslan. Can you do so?»

«Yes. I'm not sure how well,» he managed.

«Well enough. I am called Lyan. It is a pleasure to meet you, Priest.»

[*With respect, I cannot say the same. I am here to comfort and protect my Entrusted. I have no interest in anything else on this world.*]

He let Horizon-At-Noon translate into Sameslan. His arms were getting tired, and he did not know all the symbols, nor could he figure out the equivalent for those that required five fingers in place of three.

«Horizon-At-Noon has tried to explain,» signed Lyan. «You will speak for your kind about the requirements of your religion.»

DO NOT KNOW WHO IS SCREAMING.

did not expect to need them, but priests always carried their soulprobes; they were the mark of his office. He shuddered. So much metal, everywhere.

It was easy to find her; she was the only Sunone in the gate. She was also cloaked. She jumped upon seeing him and hurried forward.

Wings-Over-Sun was glad that none of the Humans would understand her near-hysteria. They were half blind, after all, and communicated among themselves by undetectable air vibrations. None could perceive the subtle patterns in the rapid flashes produced by a Sunone throat. A good thing; it would do their cause no good to appear desperate. He caught her hand

[*I do not know . . .*] He paused, then attempted to sign «religion,» a word for which his language had no equivalent. [*I am a healer of souls, and I want to make sure those Entrusted to me and mine remain undamaged.*]

Even Horizon-At-Noon had trouble with that speech. There was, as best he could tell, a discussion about *souls*. He caught some of the gestures Horizon-At-Noon was using: «part-of-person-that-cannot-be-seen.» Lyan used a new gesture—a single gesture, like pulling something small apart. Then she wrote it down. He was surprised they had a word for it. He was fairly certain Humans had no souls. But she continued.

«I understand. We have many of your profession here.»

[Then how could you have been so stupid as to let this occur?] he wanted to ask, but did not. This interpreter did not know, nor would she have appreciated being blamed.

The Human is still there, sitting silently in your house when the whole Elastic Place warps again; you try desperately to hold it together, and you almost succeed this time. There is a way, and you know you can find it if only that Human would leave, but she is always there; always from the ship where it all started. A crack opens up in the Elastic Place, folding it up like leaves, and then bright light with impossible colors floods through you.

This place is new.

Not Elastic. Not Delusion. You are looking at a Human running toward you, as if through water. His face is twisted, his mouth opens, and he reaches; you fear for your life, and then waves upon waves of pain and vibration hit you and you flee and . . .

Delusion comes. Always, Delusion comes.

I DO NOT KNOW who is screaming. Then I realize it is me, and I stop. I am holding tightly to something that is murmuring in my ear. It is Sandor. Slowly, I let go, and he releases me.

For the first time, I see him scared.

It is night, and his eyes show that I have woken him up. A large flashlight lies on the floor of my bedroom; he must have grabbed it on his way up.

"I know this is kind of a dumb question," he says, getting his breath back, "but are you all right?"

"No," I say, and almost follow it up with *I'm in Delusion*. Another one of the phrases I keep remembering from the dreams, always right before I wake up. At least it makes more sense than an Elastic Place.

God, I'm so tired. I never sleep more than two hours, and they can't do anything about that either. One of the doctors says if he finds another case of it, he'll name it after me. What an epitaph.

"I've never heard anyone scream like that." He looks at me as if expecting me to fall over. Finally he says, "Come on. We both need a drink."

He is tired, too, I notice as I follow him downstairs. I'm at my most lucid just after waking, and I know that he must have done a lot for me over the past week. Has it only been a week? It

for thinking I'm insane while I'm lucid as stone right in front of him. I hate him for not knowing the difference, while knowing I would do the same to him if he were the one going mad.

So I sit and sip the chocolate laced with rum. It is very good. Sandor almost sits, but there is a call; he goes to take it.

By the time he is back, I have finished my chocolate, and his, and half of the cake left in the refrigerator.

WINGS-OVER-SUN had not thought he could possibly be more tired than angry, and yet he was. A week he'd been on this planet, and aside from meeting Horizon-At-Noon, he had accomplished nothing.

Oh, he had done a great deal. He had met with officials, complained to officials, been chivied by officials, been sent to other officials, and filled out many forms, but he had nothing. He might as well have gone to visit Horizon-At-Noon's husband's body, for all the good he had accomplished. Indeed, talking to Human officials was very like speaking with breathing corpses. They looked alive, but said nothing. Not even a spoken word of promise that anyone could stop this tragedy from happening again.

And now he felt that tragedy as deeply as Horizon-At-Noon, and the horror that she had felt as her husband had been soukilled right in front of her. The torrent of emotion that had flowed into him during their Sharing, the first time they had contrived to be without Lyan, had almost been too much. Now Horizon-At-Noon was much calmer for having Shared . . . but he was more tired, more upset.

He caught sight of the stars and the rest of the Lattice wheeling by, a cage of corridors, docks, and chambers that crawled like a floating spider over the curve of the Earth. At least he'd been able to find a room in one of the rotating toroids. Weightlessness only added to the fatigue he had picked up in endless meetings with officials.

«We do not operate according to your concept of Entrustment,» Lyan had signed to him at one point. «We have had similar offices, but we don't work that way anymore. Even if you represented your world, this would be difficult. You must have patience.»

Lyan was another problem, but one he blessed. She did speak for him. He sometimes suspected that she only made it easier

for him and the Humans to misunderstand each other, but she did so very well, and because of her, he had been able to miscommunicate with many more

Humans than he might have otherwise. He checked himself. Even their depressing sense of humor was beginning to infect him.

The chime at the door was unexpected. Horizon-At-Noon was, as usual, in her room. For a moment he thought it might be Lyan, but she was in the kitchen. As she came into the main room, he signaled to her to open the door.

The man was inside almost before the door was open. The vibrations that passed between him and Lyan were strong and went on at length, punctuated with strange gestures. Finally, Lyan turned to him.

«This man demands to speak to you.»

might have been more. Will he run out of leave time?

I sit at the table while he heats water, but I don't try to follow what he's mixing. The scent of chocolate and something else sharp brings my senses to a new height. Even without lights it is all so *bright*. I look back and see him cutting something sweet. Sugar. I need sugar; it has been so long.

He is cutting with metal. I nearly bolt. Doesn't he know only the priests touch metal?

He slides the cup over to me with a tiny slice of cake on the side. He sees my face and flinches. What kind of expression do I have on it? "It's just me, Em. Sandor," he says.

I want to throw the whole damn plate at him then for that,

THEN I REALIZE IT IS ME.

Wings-Over-Sun looked at the man closely. Pink skin, curled hair, and more hair over its disgustingly soft mouth. He had not seen this Human before.

[What does he want?]

There was another long period of vibration. Then Lyan signed, «He is surprised I can understand your speech. He wants you to stop asking about the accident aboard the *Thuy Kieu* and about Doctor Emily Quirran.»

A name! The killer had a name. But he was not here to seek punishment, in any case. Lyan had already warned him of the impossibility of such a thing. «The Fleet protects its own,» she had said, and if that wasn't Entrustment, what was? So alien!

He regained his composure. «Tell him that I will stop when I am sure that surgery by your kind upon my kind will not happen again.» He paused. «Why does he interfere?»

When Lyan turned back this time, her face was changed.

had no time. «Do it now!»

He grabbed his case. For the first time since his novitiate, he nearly clutched his soulprobes hard enough to break them. He flashed in protest as Sandor pulled him out the door.

Now there are three places you are trapped in. There is Delusion, the Elastic Place, and this third.

You believe it to be the Human Hell.

So bright, this place, and dry, and cold. Things are narrow, as if seen only through primeyes underwater. And you see a thin, wasted Human that stares at you. You stay very still, and it does the same. It is all you can do to keep from moving.

Eventually, you may be fortunate enough to fall into the Elastic Place. But Delusion is always there, pulling. It is as much as you can do to keep still.

But you do not pray. There can be nothing here to pray to.

SUDDENLY I KNOW WHO IS INSIDE ME.

More open, somehow. «He says he is the friend of Dr. Quirran and that she is dying. He says they have friends who have told them about us. He can do nothing to help you, and very little to help her. He asks that you not shame her because of your religion.»

Wings-Over-Sun felt his throat patch glow hot with frustration. «What do I have to do with 'religion?' I do not serve your gods. I speak of my people. You refused to listen to them and the soul of one of my people is dead. His body breathes uselessly in your hospital, and his widow mourns in the next room because of your stupidity!»

The man growled low at Lyan in response. She signed: «He says that your friend might not now lie in a coma if his widow had had the intelligence to warn the doctor of your people's defense system.»

There was no end to these Humans' delusions. «Tell this man he is insane. We have no 'defense system.' What possible defense system could a wounded Sunone use against a Human? Your people have all the weapons,» he signed with a bitter expression, «and all the starships that you arm without enemies, and you think it makes you wise.»

The Human seemed to hesitate. Lyan translated again. «He wants to know, if you have no defense system, what burned his friend's hands when she operated on the Sunone.»

Burned.

The word stood out like the sun seen from his window in this place with no atmosphere. Impossible. But could it have happened? He did not want to think so; it would mean that these Humans were just too similar to Sunones, to him. Disgusting. Immediately, he felt ashamed. If there was any chance that a soul might be saved . . . He forced himself to sign clearly.

«What is your friend dying of?»

After a moment: «Her brain is losing function.»

For the first time since receiving the report back on his homeworld, Wings-Over-Sun felt a surge of joy.

«If you want her to live, take me to your friend.» He was not sure of the significance of opening eyes and mouths wide among Humans, but both Lyan and the man were doing so. He

I AM TRAPPED i cannot move there is someone something else here with me in my head in myself it runs together the thoughts run together i run together and dissolve i wonder if that has been the secret of madness incurable madness for all time a hysterical laugh would well up but i no longer control my lungs could the old ideas of demon possession be true i try to think of a prayer but i know none.

i am not dying i am being killed up until now i could force it out by being awake by being in delusion but delusion was really sanity it could come only at night but now it is here it is in control it is too late to tell anyone no one will believe a crazy woman not even sandor.

i wonder if it is possible to die of terror and lack of sleep.

THE TALL MAN led him and Lyan through a maze and into a room. The apartment inside was large and well kept.

In the center of the room slumped a woman in a large chair, facing a mirror. Her eyes were dull. A fluid ran from her mouth. Wings-Over-Sun stepped forward, not daring to let his hopes die, even for an instant. He stepped between the Human woman and the mirror.

[Moon-In-Eclipse,] he called gently.

You try to speak, but cannot. How can there be words for this miracle? The priest has come for his Entrusted, even in the Human Hell. You collapse before him.

THE HUMAN'S HEAD snapped up, and she gave a choked cry. Wings-Over-Sun jumped back. Even he had not really believed. *[Moon-In-Eclipse. Sleep. Let go.]*

AND MY ENEMY is gone. Relaxed, but still there. I smell him. Weakly, I raise my head.

Sandor and a woman I have never seen are watching me from the corner. Before me stands a Sunone, and suddenly I know who is inside me.

I scream.

THE MAN RAN forward, between Wings-Over-Sun and the woman. He showed his teeth and vibrated so hard that Wings-Over-Sun felt the wind of the Human's breath. Lyan followed, and a conversation ensued.

Finally, Lyan signed, «He is frightened because of what you have done to her. He thinks you have lied to him in order to hurt her. He says he will kill you if you hurt her. He . . . I think you should think of her as one of his Entrusted,» Lyan finished.

Wings-Over-Sun stood amazed. So much knowledge, and yet the Humans were so *slow*. She thought to tell a priest about Entrustment. He had known this from the conversation they had had in his apartment. He chose his next words carefully.

[Tell the Human this: I am going to do something dangerous. If it is not done, his Entrusted will die very slowly, as he already knows. If I succeed in this, it will save her life and I will go. If I fail, she will die quickly, and more mercifully than otherwise.]

The man and the two women vibrated among themselves for a long time.

«The woman asks for help. The man says you ask for much trust.»

Wings-Over-Sun did not answer, but looked at the Human and nodded, once. He had learned the gesture. The man looked down. Then he rose.

Wings-Over-Sun took a wooden knife from his belt and carefully made a shallow cut in the palm of his hand. Purple welled up. Ignoring the silvery pain, he inserted one end of the rod in the incision. Hopefully only one would be necessary, but soulprobes had crystallized before. Taking the woman's head in his hand, he bent it down until the back of her neck showed. He turned to Lyan.

[Tell her she must remain absolutely still.]

To her credit, Dr. Emily Quirran did not flinch at all when the wooden knife passed between her vertebrae and came within microns of her spinal column.

Wings-Over-Sun placed the rod between the cuts, and Shared, stepping through the conducting rod, and into the Human darkness, singing, calling for his lost soul.

And in the horror of Delusion, rising more triumphant than any army, and more beautiful than clouds under the moons, you see the song of your priest, who has come even into Hell for his Entrusted, and a door opens, a path of Sharing at the triple point of your horrors.

Calling you home.

LIGHT. WIND. Detachment spreads itself through the axons and dendrites, and pure, colorless fire blows from fingertips to viscera. My spine stiffens, and I surge back: The Sunone's grip is an unbreakable soft shell, and a scream forces its way up from my lungs.

Then I am sustaining a note, and the whole world is the note; a note for a chord that was never expressed in sound. And the thing that has been inside me, the shadow, is gone.

Sandor is holding a cloth to the back of my neck, and I am looking at the Sunone. He is unsteadily sheathing his knife.

I see the woman ask him, «Are you all right?»

Erratically, he signs back, «For the first time since I come, things are right.» He turns to me. «You will be well.»

It is as though I am blind, and my eyes are clearing. I understand it all. «You will return your . . .» There really is no better word in Anglic. My medical training throws up terms: Consciousness? Closed-energy symbiont? Sequenced waveform brain? None of them are right. «. . . soul . . . to its body? We have kept it alive.»

«No,» signed the Sunone. «Once the . . . circuit . . . is broken, it cannot be restored. He is dead, yet lives. I will take my Entrusted back to our village. Back to the . . . Heart.»

I shudder, discovering that I know what that means, though I cannot express it, and that it is good. «Thank you.»

«We have been most fortunate,» he signed. «Even among our people, to share bodies with another soul is . . . unusual. Dangerous. Usually, when we are cut with metal, our souls simply die. You will not do this to one of us again.»

«You know I will not,» I say.

He blinks his two simple eyes, and his face assumes an expression I now know to be one of surprise. «I do. We are no longer superstitious fools to you, are we?»

The words hurt, coming from one whose mind I have seen. Shared. «And am I still an ignorant conqueror?»

His eyes drop. «No. It was wrong to think so.»

«Yes.» He knows I speak not of his thoughts, but of my own. «We must speak. I can help you,» I say, but my head swims, and I fall back. He nods.

«Later. Later we will help each other. Now we must rest.» I see, for the first time, his own fatigue.

He rises and leaves. The woman follows, and I am left alone with Sandor. He dresses the cut on the back of my neck, and then we sit on the couch exhausted, falling rapidly toward sleep. A sleep without dreams. A sleep with hope for waking on the other side.

Before the world fades, I catch a glimpse of Sandor, and memory gleams bright and unclouded and whole, like a jewel. I think he will not be leaving soon, and for the first time in weeks, I am happy. ☹



about the author

G. Scott Huggins grew up in a household where his parents read C. S. Lewis and L. Frank Baum to him, and Alan Dean Foster and Anne McCaffrey to each other. He completed his B.A. in English at Kansas State University mostly because he was naive enough to think he could feed his wanderlust by enrolling in the university's Study Abroad program.

Huggins is currently completing his M.A. in English at Michigan State University. He attended the Clarion writer's workshop in 1997. «Requiem with Interruptions» is his second professional sale.



about the illustrator

Thom Ang has illustrated for Twentieth Century Fox, Business Week, The X-Files, Sony Music, Jim Henson Productions, Honeywell, and numerous other clients. He has also worked as a storyboard artist for Sony Animation and as an art director for Disney Interactive.

Since graduating from Art Center College of Design in 1992, he has won several awards; most recently, the Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles Award of Excellence, and Spectrum's Editorial Gold Medal.

Thom hopes to one day understand why cats hate him.



They traveled sixty-five million years into the past, with Earth-shattering consequences.

THE WORLD SIGHED with relief when the Impact Commission reported that the oncoming asteroid Achilles would miss Earth by at least twice the distance of the Moon. The report was issued with regret, for the commissioners knew they had lost a fine opportunity to demonstrate *Bulldog*, their brand-new, high-powered asteroid diverter.

The diverter, actually just a modified space tug, carried within its hold a sophisticated booster. The booster shell was built of heat-resistant metal and carried a sensing device to locate the center of mass of the oncoming body. The shell also contained a carefully designed one-shot propellant that was studded with clusters of grappling magnets. The booster need merely be launched toward the invading body. It would then take over and do the rest.

The commissioners hid their disappointment stoically. There would be other asteroids, other opportunities. They locked up the hangar and went home for the weekend.

In view of two recent prior events, such relaxation might have been a mistake. (On the other hand . . .)

The first event was the opening of a Jaquino Gate by the International Geographic Society near *Bulldog's* hangar, with the announced aim of exploring the time zone between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods of some sixty-five million years ago.

The second event was the escape of the Huygens Group from Bandline Prison, where they had been confined following an aborted attempt to take over the Navy wing in the Pentagon.

Captain Huygens, who had twice been passed over for promotion to flag rank despite his acknowledged expertise in Jaquino navigation, now announced that plans for vengeance were no longer limited to the Navy Department. He had hijacked *Bulldog*, and he now intended to destroy the entire human race.

He explained how he would do this in a rather long and disjointed video announcement over the public address system of the little ship as it sat primed for takeoff on the Jaquino launch pad.

His cohorts stood with him as he talked, two on either side. All were well known: Huygens, with his dueling scar, paper-thin cheeks, albino pupils. Commander Kelvar, blinking and squinting, actually a competent astronomer during his lucid moments. Lieutenant Vinek, sparsely mustached, the youngest of the group, who followed Huygens like a dog. Lieutenant Egon, gray-haired, many years in rank, a bitter unappreciated chemist. And Madame Dr. Wong, said to be the captain's mistress, who was also the group's expert on computers and video technology.

It was her work that enabled Captain Huygens to broadcast his message with impunity, while the world watched helplessly.

Captain Huygens mostly read from notes. "I start with the dinosaurs, because dinosaurs are the pivotal point of all that is going to happen to you—to the human race.

"These remarkable creatures came on stage following a mass extinction. They exited with another mass extinction—their own.

"Two hundred forty-five million years ago, at the end of the Permian period, drastic changes in global conditions paved the way for the dinosaurs' ancestors, with simultaneous extinction of ninety-six percent of all marine species and fifty percent of all species worldwide. Such an extinction had never occurred before, and never would again. They came, and evolved, and dominated Earth for one hundred sixty million years, until the end of the Cretaceous period, sixty-five million years ago.

"Throughout the Cretaceous, the climate was mild. Unusually large amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere provided a warming greenhouse effect, and one-third of the continental land masses subsided below sea level, opening the way for warm equatorial currents to flow through polar seas. Cold-blooded dinosaurs thrived in northern latitudes. Ferns and cycads grew in Antarctica. Forests of modern trees—maple, oak, walnut, beech—blanketed the continents. Flowering plants arrived, along with the first placental mammals—tiny furry insectivores, the ancestors of *Homo sapiens*.

"Dinosaurs reigned. All sizes, shapes. Plant-eaters, flesh-eaters, runners, waders, flyers. Mighty *Tyrannosaurus rex*, five tons, forty feet long. Pterodactyls with a fifty-foot wingspread. Yet both were small compared to *Apatosaurus*, ninety tons, eighty feet long. At the other end of the scale, some were chicken-sized.

"And then they vanished. What happened? Short answer: A meteorite struck Earth sixty-five million years ago, and then they all died.

"Attempts by various exploratory groups to view the actual strike via a Jaquino wormhole have so far been unsuccessful. The problem appears to be spatial, not temporal. We are told that with Jaquino technology we can go back in time, but we can get no closer to Earth than the Oort Cloud, which is about one-tenth of a light-year from the solar system.

"So, lacking an eyeball account, we offer a computer holo simulation. We will view the strike from an imaginary locus five thousand miles above what will eventually become Central



America. At this time, though, sixty-five million years ago, the western edge of the Caribbean plate lies under water.

"Ah, my friends, watch now, here comes the Intruder, moving at about one hundred thousand miles per hour. We slow the motion and take a good look. It's big, black, and at the moment still quite cold. Rather egg-shaped, about ten miles long, half that in diameter. It's a meteoroid, the so-called M-type, very rare, about ninety-nine percent metal—mostly iron, but with quite a bit of the platinum group. In a moment it will enter Earth's atmosphere, and it will quickly heat up and glow, red at first, then white.

"It would have become a comet, with a solar orbit of a century or so, but something happened. As it was coming in sunward, it passed near Jupiter, and it was probably Jupiter's great gravity that deflected it toward Earth. An oddity—and take careful note: If it had entered into the solar system six hours earlier, it would have avoided both Jupiter and Earth and would have gone on around the sun, to become a respectable comet.

"So—it hits. It crashes through limestone and granite crust, twenty-five miles deep into the Earth, where it vaporizes and explodes and blasts a crater one hundred sixty miles wide in the shallow sea bottom. This is followed immediately by a second blast: The tremendous heat calcines the limestone and releases carbon dioxide that blows a hole in the atmosphere, through which vast amounts of soot, dust, and miscellaneous ejecta are hurled out into space for worldwide dispersal.

"Molten sheets of ejecta splatter North and South America. Forest fires are started all over the hemisphere. And now the impact reverberates. Shock and sound spread like a shell around the world and refocus in what would become the Indian Ocean, with assorted secondary catastrophes, then echo back around to their starting point . . . and then again and again. . . . It goes on for days.

"Millions of tons of dust and smoke fill the skies. The sun is blotted out. It will not be seen again in its full majesty for decades. Most of the land plants die, and as a result the herbivorous dinosaurs starve. The flesh-eaters are next. Small, burrowing creatures survive—the eaters of insects, roots, and miscellaneous rotting life—the ancestors of *Homo sapiens*.

"Do you get the point? If the meteor had bypassed Earth, dinosaurs would have continued indefinitely as the dominant species, and the furry little rodent ancestors of *Homo sapiens* would have continued to eat their grasshoppers and beetles and be eaten by their dinosaur overlords.

"But the meteor did not bypass Earth. So the Age of Dinosaurs ended, and the Age of Mammals began.

"The Intruder left its calling card—significant traces of iridium, platinum, and osmium, today detectable in the so-called K-T layer of clay, which marks the boundary between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary periods. In fact, that is really all that's left of the Intruder itself. The submerged crater finally surfaced when an ocean crust subducted the Caribbean plate in the Miocene epoch, twenty-five million years ago, following which

nearly all signs of the impact weathered away.

"The normal progress of evolution was shattered when the Intruder struck. If that had not happened, dinosaurs would still be the dominant species, and *Homo sapiens* would never have evolved.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, all you listeners out there, the story isn't over. Evolution can and will be put back on track. The dinosaurs need not die. The Intruder can be deflected from Earth, and we will do it. We are taking *Bulldog* through the Jaquino Gate, sixty-five million years into the past. We will find the meteor, and we will change its course with your asteroid diverter, which you have so kindly placed at our disposal. When we return to this present, we will see no humans, only dinos and their descendants. The Navy Department never comes into existence. For that matter, neither will any of you. What about us? We five will survive, because we will not be here when it happens to you. And now—good-bye!"

Bulldog vanished.

SUBSEQUENT EVENTS aboard ship were routinely recorded by the Black Box, with automatic rebroadcast by hypercom back to some very nervous scientists gathered at the Jaquino terminal.

To wit:

Voice of Madame Dr. Wong: Well, we're through the Jaquino. Where is the Intruder?

Captain Huygens: We'll find it. Just a question of looking in the right place. Analysis of the fragmentary concentric crustal disruptions in the Yucatan indicated that the strike came from the northwest, at an angle of thirty degrees to the horizon, and hence that the meteoroid had left the Oort from an area above the ecliptic. Since the hit could have taken place anywhere along Earth's orbit, the locus of origin is evidently an annulus located "overhead," between the Oort and the solar system.

Commander Kelvar: Too big, too big. We'll never find it.

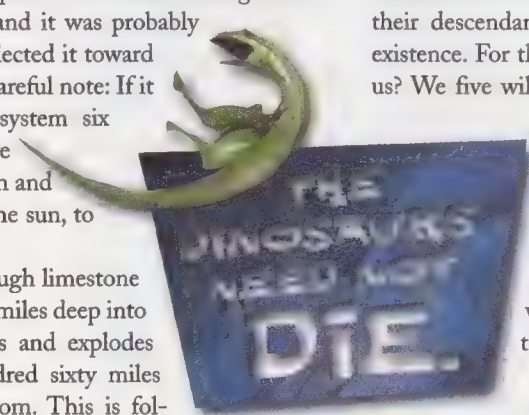
In the following minutes, they considered ways to narrow the search pattern. Knowing that Jupiter was probably involved in changing the trajectory of the meteor, they shrank the locus to an area in the annulus when Jupiter and Earth were in opposition. At that point the planning snagged.

Commander Kelvar: That's no help. Earth-Jupiter opposition happens approximately every thirteen months. During a span of a few hundred thousand years, we'd have to search a few hundred thousand loci. It's simpler just to search the inner perimeter of the annulus. The chances are fifty-fifty we'll encounter the Intruder on its way out of the Oort and headed for the sun before we're halfway around.

The rest of the crew took that advice. Late in the tenth day of their search, they found a great misshapen black meteoroid that rotated leisurely on its axis every four hours. They quickly conducted measurements and tests. Mass was estimated by both physical and gravimetric measurements. Composition was determined by standard laser spectroscopy. The rock was found to be practically pure iron, with minute traces of other elements.

Commander Kelvar (loudly and high-pitched): Wrong rock!

Lieutenant Vinek (in a similar tone): You're wrong, sir. It's got to be the Intruder. I say launch the booster!



Dr. Madame Wong: I'm not an astronomer, chemist, or navigator, but I'm not stupid, either. Let's back up, take this step by step. We are reasonably certain it came from here in the Oort. These planetesimals here come mostly in two flavors—stony and stony-metal. But once in a great while there's a Class M—all iron except for traces of other metals.

Lieutenant Egon: So?

Madame Dr. Wong: Look at the evidence. An M-Class is a rarity. This is the only one in this area. This M-Class has the characteristics that we have assigned to the Intruder. It's a very close match. *Quod erat demonstrandum.* We need look no farther.

Lieutenant Egon: But is this the Intruder? As official chemist, I have grave doubts. Agreed, it fits the theory for size and mass, but we still have a problem.

Madame Dr. Wong: Which is?

Lieutenant Egon: Titanium, doctor. It's in the K-T clay layer, back on Earth, but there's none in this meteoroid.

Lieutenant Vinek: Sounds to me like it could easily be within experimental error, either here on the ship or back home in the research labs. You're talking picograms, Mr. Egon. Nothing to get excited about.

Madame Dr. Wong: I quite agree. We would expect to find titanium in the K-T layer in any event. Titanium is one of the most abundant elements in Earth's crust and is widely diffused. We would be surprised if we *didn't* find titanium in the K-T.

Lieutenant Egon: That's all very true, but it doesn't make the problem go away. The K-T titanium is perceptibly higher than mere background levels. Speaking chemically, I say we keep looking until we find a meteoroid with titanium.

Commander Kelvar: I'm inclined to agree, but for another reason. I've further refined my orbital calculations for this rock, and I've found a slight deviation—not much, just a few parts in a trillion, but when extrapolated over a four-year voyage to Earth, the possible error becomes measurable in hours. This candidate may not pass close enough to Jupiter to be diverted toward Earth. It may move on toward the Sun and simply become a recurrent comet, probable period of a hundred fifty years or so. I say we keep looking.

Lieutenant Egon: That makes sense. Find one that fits both orbit and chemistry *exactly*.

Madame Dr. Wong: I disagree. Our computers give us a high probability that the Intruder came from *this* locale sixty-five million years ago. And we know something made the journey, and that it struck. These are facts, and there is only one possible conclusion. This rock is the Intruder. With respect, Mr. Egon, Mr. Kelvar, if your data don't support this conclusion, then your data are wrong. And I ask you both: Are your instruments more accurate than one part in a quadrillion?

Following this question, silence for thirty-seven seconds. . . .

Madame Dr. Wong: You see, dear friends, within the limits of experimental error, I could be right. Right?

Captain Huygens: Well, my experts, is this the rock?

Another period of silence. . . .

Captain Huygens: All right. Clearly, the four of you are at odds. Madame Dr. Wong and Lieutenant Vinek in favor of launching, Commander Kelvar and Lieutenant Egon in favor of continuing to look. It falls to me, appropriately enough, to break the tie.

Madame Dr. Wong: Of course, Captain, it always was your decision. You are our leader. *(In a mildly sarcastic tone)* We wouldn't be here if it weren't for you.

Captain Huygens: We do what we came for. Launch the booster.

Ship's telemetry records note two inertial changes within the next thirty seconds—one rather slight, when the booster was flung toward the meteoroid, and then a stronger one as *Bulldog* headed back for the wormhole.

Lieutenant Vinek (voice low, somewhat strained): Captain, the titanium . . . in the K-T layer, I mean. I think I may have just now figured out where it came from. Meaning no disrespect, Mr. Egon. . . .

Lieutenant Egon: All right, Vinek, where did it come from?

Lieutenant Vinek: If you add up all the titanium in the two thousand trillion square meters of the K-T biostratigraphic layer, you get a number that closely matches the mass of our booster shell, which was pure cast titanium.

Silence for twenty seconds. . . .

Madame Dr. Wong: Good God! This changes everything!

Captain Huygens (with a bitter laugh): So . . . that meteoroid was indeed the Intruder, and our boost turned out to be just the right amount to expose the meteoroid to Jupiter, and the giant planet did in fact dutifully swing it toward Earth. And we face an interesting irony: The booster not only did not *prevent* the Intruder from striking Earth, it actually *caused* it to strike.

Lieutenant Egon: So we killed the dinosaurs?

Commander Kelvar: Yes.

Madame Dr. Wong (tone appears distinctly morose): If we had never come here, they would have lived.

Commander Kelvar: We *saved* civilization.

Lieutenant Vinek: Maybe we'll all get medals!

NONE OF THEM GOT MEDALS. However, their book was a tremendous bestseller, and what with prequel, sequel, movie rights, holo miniseries, souvenirs, and toys, they made a great deal of money. 📖



about the author

Charles L. Harness has been writing time-travel stories ever since his first short-story sale, "The Time Trap," in 1948. He spent most of his professional life as a patent lawyer, and has written two novels and many shorter works dealing with the quirks and oddities of the patent system. "With more to come," he promises. His work has been nominated for the Hugo Award three times and the Nebula Award twice.

Harness lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, "surrounded by dozens of family photos and monitored by a neurotic cat."



about the illustrator

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1954, Steve Brodner has been a satirical illustrator for twenty-seven years. His caricatures of pop and political culture have appeared in every major publication in the United States, including National Lampoon, Sports Illustrated, Harper's, Playboy, Esquire, The Village Voice, and The New Yorker.

Brodner lives in New York City with his wife, writer and actress Anna Pasquale, and their ten-year-old daughter, Terry.

*There's no better way to spend your birthday
than saving the world.*

BY CHRISTIAN L. CAMPBELL

the REIGN of RAINBOW stars

RANDA RITENOIRE thought he might sit in bed all day and cram down as much beer and chocolate-covered crickets as he possibly could. Or maybe he'd cover himself with red paint and make prints of his body all over the white walls of his flat. Then again, he'd been wondering what it would be like to get himself surgically altered, walk around the city as a half-horse or lizard man, and then laugh at the funny looks the so-called enlightened citizens gave him—perhaps today was the day for that. Whatever he eventually did, it was his free, unfettered, uninfluenced choice. Today was Randa's birthday. He was fifty.

He'd get around to something in a while. Or perhaps he wouldn't. What harm would there be in staying right where he was for the next twenty-four hours? Nobody would call him and complain if he played the recluse, because today was the one day he wasn't responsible for performing official functions as a Worshiper. That was the point in giving people the whole day off on their birthday; it was a time not to be a career, but a person, to get back in touch with yourself, your personal goals, and your purpose in life, if indeed such a thing was possible.

ILLUSTRATION BY
VANCE YPSILANTI





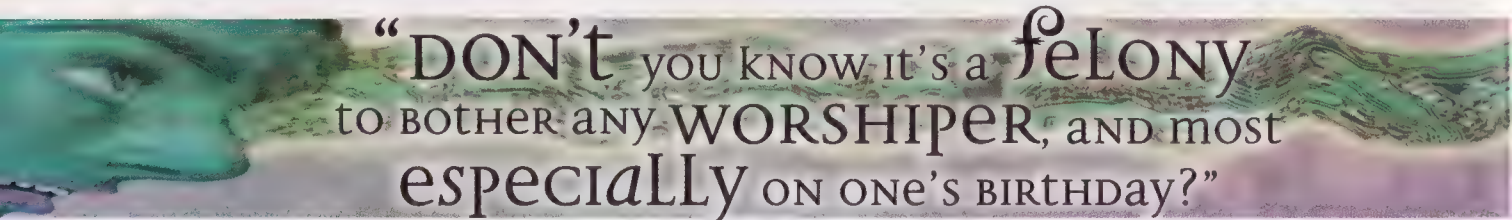
Thinking about that, Randa eventually rolled out of bed, sat on the edge thereof, and thought about everything and nothing in general. "Happy birthday," he said aloud. The words sounded bitter. What was one day out of the hundreds every year, the thousands in his lifetime, to get back to his core self? He'd be lucky to catch a glimpse of himself in the crowds. To sit down with his true self for a good long chat seemed a remote possibility at best.

Three times he lay back down and closed his eyes, then sat up again. He thought about warped, wiggling timepieces, and saw red numbers floating the correct time before him. That function, and a basic locating ability, was all that was left to him out of the myriad abilities accessible to the pack of empathy chips in

frightening prospect that was, to be against an army of ten thousand, each one of which could melt a building down around you!

Randa suddenly smacked into somebody, his shoulder meeting the woman's, both of them recoiling in surprise and anger. Where had this woman come from? Randa had no idea where she'd been hiding, but they now stood in an open area of grass over which ten soaring walkways met at an elevated plaza.

Words came to his lips—"May the Rainbow Stars be your umbrella"—but he held them in check. It was just as well, for the woman turned with a huff and stalked off toward where one of the soaring walkways met the ground. For him to have uttered the supplication, common from a Worshiper but not



"DON'T you know it's a felony to BOTHER ANY WORSHIPER, and most especially ON ONE'S BIRTHDAY?"

his brain. He was supposed to be glad about that, but all he felt was a nagging irritation at being shut off from the world. That irritation was almost as bad as the anger he felt when he was hooked into the Stars, when he was performing all his duties with the full power of a Worshiper.

"What's it all about?" he asked aloud as he made his way toward the closet.

Fifteen minutes later he was on the street, dressed not in his familiar chartreuse Worshiper's robe, but a jumpsuit that had one long leg and one that went only down to the knee. The suit's sleeves slowly grew long or shrank up to the shoulder, alternating, every five minutes becoming the same length. Randa didn't really like the getup, but it was the only civilian clothing he had, so he made do. Despite his dislike, it must have been at least close to being in fashion, because those who passed him by barely gave a second look.

Yesterday, the people were bowing or nodding in respect as they passed. Tomorrow they would do so again.

Randa scratched at a spot on the back of his left hand. He sighed. Another cancer. Darn, but tumors were an annoyance! Well, he wouldn't bother with it today. Tomorrow would be soon enough to find an RX booth and get it cured. Thinking about all the tumors he'd had in his life, Randa wandered up the street.

He had nowhere in particular to go, he just needed to walk for a while. He asked himself if he was happy with life, or if maybe he should look for some other course of action to get through it. But what could he do? Worshipers were the top of the heap; to become an officer of the Law or maybe an orbital agent of Satellite Control, or any other lowly career he could care to name, meant removing empathy chips, an unheard-of process. He wasn't even sure it was possible. Surely there was a psychological barrier at least. Of course there would be the basic schism of leaving the Church of Rainbow Stars, otherwise known as the Order of Worshipers. His fellows would see it as a betrayal, a slap in the face—not their faces, but the faces of the Stars. There would be repercussions, legal or otherwise. What a

from a citizen such as he was playing today, would have caused the poor lady more confusion than peace. It might even have led to a lengthy question-and-answer session Randa had no patience for.

He saw a tall man in a dark green robe walk off one walkway and onto another. "The enemy," he said reflexively, then hoped nobody had heard him. It seemed nobody had. He went to a bench beside a fountain and collapsed there, worn out like he'd been walking for many miles.

Maybe the enemy—the Rationalists—had it right. They worshiped the Rainbow Stars, as did the Order of Worshipers. Where they differed was in thinking some other god was out there—some omnipotent, invisible being—who had given the Stars to humanity, had endowed each and every one of the three trillion plus satellites with sentience, and charged them to protect and guide the human race, then had summarily disappeared from known space. The Worshipers, on the other hand, knew for sure the Rainbow Stars were merely an almost unbelievably complex system of manmade satellites orbiting the Earth; there was programmed intelligence in the devices, but certainly nothing that could be called life.

The Rationalists, who believed the satellites to be alive, shunned all empathy chips but the most rudimentary, those they absolutely needed to get through life. Something in their dogma proclaimed it a sin to attempt a link with the Stars in any way. According to them, humanity was supposed to live their lives and be thankful for the gifts of the Stars, but not to attempt by any means to influence their working. Worshipers, those who understood the Stars to be nothing more than the epitome of technology, were each and every one packed with every empathy chip they could get, until they heard, saw, and smelled every emission or transmission that came from the satellites. They did everything they could to influence the Stars, considered it their solemn duty to use the power they had to the benefit of people all over the world.

So to be a Rationalist would be to have a purpose, but retain a grip on a much simpler life. Maybe that's what Randa wanted.

He looked up at the joining walkways, trying to find the dark green robe. Maybe he could chase after the man, ask him more about his life preaching sentient Stars and invisible, omnipotent people. His search didn't pan out, but then his attention was pulled away by the sky. Even when overcast, as it was today, the Stars could be seen. Millions from any spot on Earth, was the saying. Now they weren't the pinpoint flashing dabs of light, but pastel-colored spots on the clouds, every color, rushing in every direction. It looked as if the clouds were alive with electrical pulses, and the effect was one of tranquil beauty.

"May the Rainbow Stars be my umbrella," Randa said softly. "Hey!"

Randa looked back down to Earth, miffed that he'd been interrupted during the one content moment he'd managed to find today. All the inner turmoil had gone away in the face of how beautiful the Stars could be, and now it was back.

He looked into the face of an angry man. The man was naked, and obviously insane. His nudity didn't make him crazy; people were exposing themselves all over the world these days, even in cold places such as New York in January. But, perhaps because they had no clothing to hide behind, those people took special care to present their bodies in the best possible light. Paints, hair designs, and jewelry could be seen creatively used by the nudists of the world, and the effect was usually something to appreciate. Also, they were always meticulously clean. This madman before Randa had been neither accessorized nor washed. The closer he came, the more Randa wanted to jump up and sprint away as fast as he could.

"You're a Worshiper!" screamed the man, his voice reaching a particularly unnerving pitch. "I've seen you at the games."

Randa supposed that was possible. Twice a year those brave souls in Satellite Control who had obtained the right to be orbital agents gathered up above the Earth, in the midst of the Rainbow Stars, and had a race. The Satellite Games, they were called, but really the race was the single event. It was a very long race, lasting for three days, fraught with many dangers. To ease the racers' task, a team of Worshipers would gather for a public prayer of supplication to the Stars, that they might help the human beings rushing through their midst in whatever way they could. Many people came to watch the prayer, then went home to watch the race on lightvision.

Despite this possibility, or perhaps because of it, Randa wanted nothing more than to get far away from this lunatic. He stood. "Sir," he began, hunting around for the proper words to excuse himself. Never having had to do it before, he failed to come up with anything, was left standing there looking like an idiot. The situation began to worsen as people paused to stare at the spectacle.

The crazy man rushed forward and slapped a reeking hand on Randa's shoulder. The encrusted face was suddenly way too close, the foul breath blasting forth with wild words. Randa turned his head, saw people scattering; as soon as the man's words were out, the spectacle became more frightening than interesting. "Signals. I'm telling you, signals from the cosmos have been received! There is intelligent life out there, and we're ignoring it. We'd rather stay hidden behind our curtain of precious satellites than join the community of sentient beings."

To which Randa said nothing. The mention of "out there" made him think of the Stars and reminded him painfully how he would not have to suffer this fool to be accosting him like this, were he still connected as a Worshiper. Ah, with all the chains of duty came a few perks! But he wasn't connected, and suffer he did. He began to consider how to force his way out and away.

The madman opened his mouth to rant some more, but suddenly blanched at something behind and above Randa. Randa turned and saw a policewoman standing on the other side of the bench, her beefy arms folded across her mighty chest, eyes narrowed to slits.

"Is this man bothering you, sir?" the policewoman asked.

Randa nodded, and silently praised the Rainbow Stars.

The policewoman stepped right over the bench like it wasn't there and glommed onto the man's upper arm. His arm looked like a twig in her hand. Randa expected to see a fight, but the man stood there quaking, a little boy caught at some great transgression. The policewoman gave him a vigorous shake to assert her authority, a needless action.

To Randa she said, "I heard what he said. Are you a Worshiper?"

"Yes, I am. But, uh, it's my birthday, so I couldn't call for you."

"I understand. Happy birthday." She whipped out a fleeting smile, then buried it under her scowl again.

To the naked man she said, "Harassing a Worshiper! Alien signals! Haven't you been through General Studies? Don't you know it's a felony to bother any Worshiper, and most especially on one's birthday? And haven't you heard of the Sanctity Act of Peko-Tomradano?" She was speaking of the last of the Named Years, that sad, failed fifty-year experiment when the years were named, not numbered. During that last year many important laws had been passed, not the least of which was the Sanctity Act. Now she quoted: "No citizen of Earth shall regard the cosmos with anything but aesthetic interest. No signals shall be sent forth in an attempt to contact any supposed alien life. No receivers shall be constructed to recover signals sent by such life. No orbital device shall be built which has any purpose other than support of the Rainbow Stars. No devices shall be built to carry human beings beyond the Rainbow Stars. The Earth shall remain sacred, sanctified. There is the world, and the Rainbow Stars, and naught else." She dropped the quoting tone, found the scornful one again. "You should be ashamed!"

"I am," mumbled the man, and he hung his head.

"No matter. You must be killed. Come along."

"Wait!" said Randa.

The policewoman, who had been turning to leave with her prisoner, spun back to Randa with a surprised look. "Justice can't wait, sir. All laws dealing with the Rainbow Stars must be taken seriously; you know that."

Randa, now that he had spoken, wished he hadn't. He had only a slight notion why he felt a need to interfere with the normal process of the Law. It had something to do with today being his birthday, of feeling like just another little person in the world, a subject of the King and the Queen and their Stars like everybody else. As such, he felt sorry for the crazy man (now that he didn't have to smell him), wanted him to get a second chance. It also had to do with knowing that if this poor man

was hauled away and executed, Randa was, despite not being hooked into the Stars, still playing a part. He remained part of the machine, as hopelessly programmed to specific action as he would have been any day performing normal Worshiper duties. These thoughts, though, refused to clarify in his mind, and he failed to translate emotions into words. After some useless gesturing, he gave a sorry little shrug.

"Thanks for the help."

The policewoman nodded. She regarded him solemnly; then, leaning forward and speaking quietly, she said, "Don't worry about it. He's obviously a wacko. They don't kill nuts anymore. He'll probably get sent to a camp to help make satellites, and be better for it." She hustled away before Randa could comment, dragging the crazy man along with her.

Randa sat back down on the bench and tried to recapture the sense of peace he'd felt right before the ranting attack had begun. Alas, the clouds were thicker now, and he could see only faint patches of the brightest Stars. The calming beauty of the heavens was no longer available.

He got up and walked away quickly, wanting to be anywhere out of sight of that bench. Before a hundred paces passed, he had formulated a plan for the immediate future: He would go see Boris Lightowler, his friend. Boris was an Editor working at Publishing House, the largest commercial company in the world and the only source of written fiction.

Only ten Editors worked in the House, for there were only ten magazines. The mags covered every subject people cared to read about—those people who bothered to learn how to read in a world almost totally devoid of the written word. Anything not covered in print was provided to excess by lightvision shows, courtesy of the Rainbow Stars. Boris Lightowler's editorial subject was speculative fiction, which included science fiction, horror, fantasy, and sometimes stories that fit the spaces between those subjects.

Max, the husband and secretary of Boris, was dusting a glass statue of the Great Bradbury, which resided in one corner of the grand antechamber to Boris's office. As Randa entered, Max turned to face him, and an enormous smile flashed on his face.

"Randa! A joy to see you. Happy birthday."

Randa returned a polite smile and nodded. For all the times he had been to visit Boris, he still hadn't developed a comfortable friendship with Max. "Is the Master in?" he asked. He wasn't trying to be funny; "Master" was the proper title of respect for an Editor.

"He is, yes." Max dropped his duster into a hole in the wall and went to sit at his desk. With hands placed on top, he stared straight ahead, his eyes glowing yellow and orange as he tied into his satellite. The process went like this: The Rainbow Stars created the World Power Grid, the world-encompassing energy field that powered everything that needed energy to fulfill its function. When someone wanted to hook up with his or her satellite, he or she thought a certain code. (Randa's was the image of three pine needles resting on a purple plate that floated in a pool of red liquid, accompanied by a light wind from the left and the smell of vanilla.) The proper code initiated a signal from the empathy chip in the user's brain. This signal was relayed to the proper satellite by the WPG, and the connec-

tion was made. Total time from initial thought to hookup was about half a second, maybe a full second if the satellite was on the other side of the world at the moment.

Now that Max was connected, he checked on what Boris was doing. If he was editing, Randa would have to wait. The editing process began with the common satellite link, but from there it was highly specialized. Over three million short stories and half a million novels came to Boris every month, all desiring the privilege of being published in the world's only speculative fiction magazine. Boris was obligated to read them all in thirty days, choose one hundred short stories and three novels, and reject the rest, giving specific reasons for doing so. Obviously, this was impossible for a man left to his own resources. By linking with the group of satellites owned by Publishing House, however, he could perform miracles. The stories were stored and coded in a queue, then channeled through Boris's Editor empathy chip, a much more advanced model than most people carried around. In effect, he "remembered" reading the stories in rapid progression. With each memory came a spontaneous feeling, and a sorting and filing program took over automatically. This process, though highly tuned and constantly improved, put a heavy load on the human mind, even the peculiarly specialized minds of the Editors. To burst into the middle of this process would be to endanger Boris's mental health; thus, Max ran the check.

He finally relaxed and folded his arms across his chest. His eyes returned to normal. "Okay, you can go on in. He's on break, getting ready to watch some LV."

Randa mumbled a word of thanks, turned, and walked straight at a dark spot on the wall. An oval opened up in time to let him walk through without injury.

Boris sat in the middle of an almost empty room, leaning back in a large, overly padded recliner. He was an immense man, easily twice Randa's mass. And he was hairy. Which is to say, Boris didn't wear any clothes, he had so much hair. This condition was the result of one of those surgical operations Randa had been considering at the beginning of his day. The big man had had the procedure done two years ago, and had often told Randa how fun it was to watch people secretly try to see his penis. They would always fail, because part of the operation had been to put that organ away in an artificial sheath.

"Happy birthday!" boomed Boris, for Boris boomed everything, such was his voice. "Come here, dear Worshiper. Sit down next to me and tell me all the fun things you're doing today." He slapped the seat of the recliner, which expanded as he spoke, becoming a small couch.

Randa dropped down with an explosive sigh. Before he could say a word, Boris slapped an arm around his shoulders and gave him such a vigorous hug Randa thought he might be sick.

"Please . . ."

"Eh?" Boris leaned a little forward, twisting around to get a good look. "That does *not* look like happiness. Expose yourself, young man; tell me all about it."

Randa did just that, starting with the trouble he had getting going in the morning, recounting the startling meeting with the insane man, repeating almost verbatim his wild ranting, and

ending with his confusion when the man had been taken away for punishment. "Last year," he concluded, "I would have gleefully watched him go, then gotten back to my birthday. Well, maybe not gleefully, but it wouldn't have bothered me all that much. So why am I bothered with it today?"

"Why indeed?" Boris stroked the length of beard falling off his face, a sign of great thoughts hatching inside him. "Perhaps you caught something from him. Maybe *you* are now insane."

Randa dropped his mouth in surprise. It must have been an amusing expression, for Boris threw back his head and howled with laughter, his eyes squeezed shut, his fists banging his legs. His laughing went on until at last he gasped for breath, fought his way to soberness. He turned moist eyes upon Randa.

"My little Worshiper! Don't be so alarmed. I was only kidding! I don't think you're insane, nor do I ever suppose you'll get that way."

Randa scowled at him. "I presume you thought that was necessary?"

"Maybe I did. This is your birthday, after all. You're supposed to be happy. Now, what's going to happen if all the Worshipers go around being glum on their birthdays? Those days off will be canceled, that's what! And then, why think an Editor should have a birthday, if a Worshiper can't? You're dooming my party day, so knock off the gloominess, pal."

Randa forced himself to produce a little smile. "Don't worry. It was a singular event, not to happen again. I swear by the Stars." He pointed overhead with his right hand while holding his left hand over his chest.

Boris rushed them from the building in a hurry, only stopping long enough to give Max a quick kiss and a promise to be back soon. His hand engulfed in the Editor's, Randa allowed himself to be fairly dragged down the street to the nearest crib stop. They had boarded a local crib and were seated in a private booth in the back less than five minutes after leaving the office.

The crib pulled instantly into traffic and reached a safe city cruising speed of about a hundred miles per hour. Randa watched out the window as people zipped by, wondering how many of them regretted the lives they led. Did any of them want to be Worshipers?

"Ready," said Boris.

Randa turned his attention back to his friend. "Ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready to tell you all about our luncheon. My slight young friend, this meeting is no small affair, and certainly it's not a spur-of-the-moment thing. It's been planned for quite a while. There were appointments scheduled and met, plans crafted, people spoken to, and so here we are. Well, the original plan said *we* aren't supposed to be here, just me. But due to your mood, I thought you could use a jolt of patriotism."

Randa squinted. "A huh? A jolt of whazzit?"

"You seem to be upset by the status quo; the way things are. So now you'll see some people who actively want to change the way things are. And you'll help me stop these people."

"I will? Boris, you have an extremely unusual opinion of what makes up a business lunch."

"Indubitably. And shut up, please, my dear friend, so I can explain. It's like this. A couple of months ago I came upon a

**"PERHAPS you caught
something from him. maybe YOU
are now INsane."**

"Now help me think of other things, Boris. How's your magazine going? Why weren't you working when I came in? Done already?"

"Why no, you unnecessarily silly, though uncommonly cute, little boy. I'm on the way out to a business lunch."

"Business lunch? Editors have those?"

Boris looked puzzled. "Sure. Doesn't everybody?" He waved a hand in front of Randa's open mouth. "Don't bother answering; it's what we in the publishing business refer to as a rhetorical question. Hey! I've got an idea—why don't you come along?"

"Oh, yeah, that's it, I'll just invite myself along on somebody else's business lunch. That'll make your client real happy."

"Pish, and posh right along with it. Shake this funk, boy. Smile. Laugh. Be happy. Leave your dreadful single life and come be my second husband."

Randa did smile as he shook his head. It was such a proposal that had brought the two together many years ago. Randa still didn't know whether Boris was serious, but the come-on never failed to lighten his mood.

Boris said, "Okay, you won't marry me. But come along for lunch, anyway, hey? It's very important. I'll even break protocol and tell you all about it on the way there. Yes?"

"Well . . . yes!"

story in the queue. It was called 'The Reign of Rainbow Stars.' No flags attached to it, so I reviewed it like all the others. It turned out to be a shocking little piece of work."

"What was it about?" asked Randa.

A low growl came from Boris. "Shut—"

"—up. Sorry."

Apparently appeased, Boris continued his tale. "The story was about a group of people who have heard signals from outer space, sent by alien life, which is waiting for them to come out for a meeting. The aliens can't come here, because they fear trying to navigate a path through all the satellites, and also because all the electromagnetic activity of the WPG would kill them. So they beckoned, and waited.

"The group of people form a secret coalition and conspire to build a space vessel. They go through many trials and tribulations. They're even discovered once, and almost destroyed, but manage to regroup and start over. Then they complete a ship and launch, and it collides with seven satellites simultaneously, killing all aboard. Finally, they figure out a way to build their ship by sections, send them up one at a time, where they pose as satellites for many months. They take a small shuttle up, assemble their craft, and escape into space. They meet the aliens and live happily ever after.

"The review gave me an abhorrent reaction. That reaction in turn activated certain safeguard programs, not the least of which was a total shutdown of the editing system. That one story was held at the ready while notice was sent to the Law. Within minutes an officer was breathing down my neck. For some reason, she thought I was engaged in illegal activities.

"She needn't have worried. I volunteered my services wholeheartedly to help bring the writer of this filth to justice. Well, after that there was a lot of police activity I didn't really understand, but the final result was we found the writer.

"Guess what? It turned out it wasn't fiction—there really was a conspiracy! The story was a confession, a way to warn the authorities."

Randa gasped despite his resolve not to interrupt. A conspiracy against the Stars! His eyes gleamed with indignation as he leaned forward. "Yes? And were they killed?" Here was a threat he could support eradicating. Not a glimmer of doubt showed itself.

"They were not." Boris held up his hands, silencing Randa's protests before they started. "Better than that. We got our hands on this guy, a peon who'd become disgruntled with the coalition and wanted to expose it without having to do it in person. The Law offered him his life in return for assistance. He agreed. Working with him, we contacted the larger group, and I pretended to join them. I've been going to their meetings for a long time now, keeping tabs on them.

"Today, right now, I'm supposed to join them for the final flight."

"What!" Randa jumped to his feet and smacked his head against the crib ceiling. He sat down again, holding his head.

Boris chuckled, deep and slow. "See, you feel more patriotic already. The final flight will contain all the leaders of the con-

pedestrians, he realized that "alone" wasn't quite the proper word. Like anywhere else in a world of a hundred billion inhabitants, plenty of people were about, but he couldn't bring himself to feel confident or out of danger among these. Somewhere around here, an abomination had been allowed to spawn and mature, and these people had let it happen. Randa swallowed, felt commitment settle over his soul like a heavy coat.

"Come," instructed Boris, and he headed quickly down the street. Randa scurried after. They turned many corners, entered several buildings only to exit out the rear of each one, and ascended three levels of walkways. Randa saw that his earlier condemnation of the neighborhood was unwarranted, for, indeed, they passed out of and far away from that area, walked so far he started to feel pain in his knees and the beginnings of blisters on his feet.

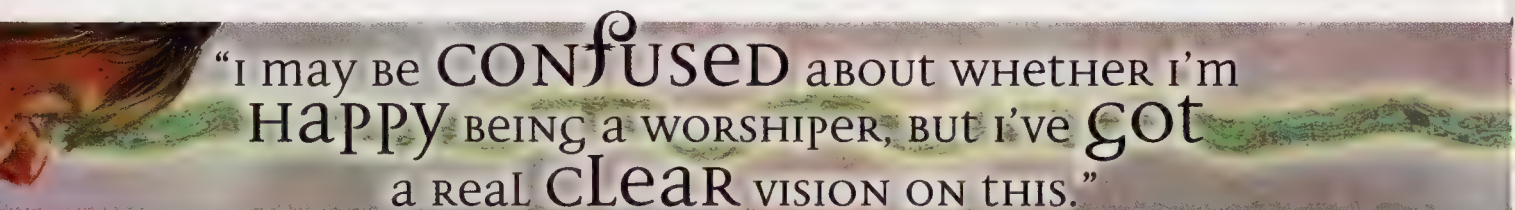
Finally, Boris halted before a nondescript violet door. "Ready? Still with me?"

"Still." Randa was panting from the walk.

They pressed through the insubstantial molecules of the door. What they passed into was a vast space filled with tables of unfamiliar (to Randa) technological gizmos and empty multifiform molds. Here and there, people were bent over some project or staring into space as they carried out work with the help of the Rainbow Stars. Each and every one of the people seemed a very average man or woman. Randa tried, but failed to find, an openly sinister face.

Boris approached a short woman with cascading red hair. Her eyes gleamed with the light of multiple satellite connections. She was oblivious to their presence for a moment, then blinked her eyes to normal green irises and met Boris's gaze.

She nodded at Randa. "Who's this?" Her voice was tired, full of sand.



"I may be **CONFUSED** ABOUT WHETHER I'M
HAPPY BEING a WORSHIPER, BUT I'VE GOT
a real **CLEAR** VISION ON THIS."

spiracy, and they will have the coordinates we need to catch all the little hatchlings. So I go to join them, and the Law follows. You can come along, help bring them to justice. Or you can go your own way. You're not compelled to do anything, Randa."

Randa shook his head. "You're wrong. I may be confused about whether I'm happy being a Worshiper, but I've got a real clear vision on this. I have to do what's right. I'm with you. I'm staying right here."

"Good!" Boris clapped a powerful hand on his friend's shoulder. They held a look for a long, silent moment, then broke apart. "Now, relax; it's a long trip."

"A long trip" meant twenty minutes before Boris's eyes flashed, indicating he was going into Public Access to give the stop orders. A minute after that, they stood on the curb watching the crib zip away, leaving them alone in unfamiliar territory.

As Randa began to look into the surly faces of the local

"Randa. He's sympathetic. Wants to come along."

The woman blinked, her jaw going a little slack. "Wants to come along? What? Wants to come along?" Her face clearly showed she didn't grant the slightest plausibility to the statement.

"Yes, he wants to come along." Boris clasped both hands together in front of him and hugged them to his furry chest. It was a gesture Randa had never seen before, so he wasn't sure whether it denoted fear, hesitation, or mere supplication. He didn't believe any of those emotions could ever come from Boris Lightowler.

The woman smacked her fist into Boris's chest. She said, her voice trilling with emotion, "No, he *can't* come along! What do you think this is, Boris, a picnic? Do you suppose we'll be coming back real soon? No. Absolutely not. Not only may he not come along, but he may not leave this place for two days, until we've made good our escape. Stev!" The last word was hollered out over the room.

A young man with green hair came running up. "What is it, Lisl?"

The woman pointed at Randa. "This joker thinks he's going to come along with us. Not so. Put him in storage. Set a timer on the door for two days." She turned to glare at Boris. "And put our Editor with him."

Boris shook his head, quickly faking a very realistic panic. "Lisl! Please, I need to get away. The satellites are killing me. Don't leave me here, I beg of you."

"Be silent, Boris. Now, go with Stev, so we don't have to hurt you."

Boris hung his head, apparently crushed. He walked beside Randa as they both peacefully followed Stev. The young man headed for the far side of the room, where large storage lockers were crowded against the wall. Randa tried to simultaneously watch his friend and all the questioning eyes that followed them. He couldn't believe such a man as Boris would be so submissive, but so compelling was the Editor's humility, Randa was almost convinced it was for real.

They stopped at one of the storage lockers. Stev pulled at three pink levers, and the door faded away. He motioned them in. They stepped inside, then turned to face the green-haired kid.

He actually smiled at them. "Try not to be too sad, Boris. You'll be out in two days. I'll set the timer faithfully. There's some rations behind you, and a small vent for air, so you'll be comfortable."

Boris glared at him. "You might as well kill me."

Stev's eyes widened. He quickly manipulated the levers, and the door solidified again.

A lone, Randa and Boris turned to survey the situation. The storage locker was about ten feet on a side, empty except for a couple of boxes, presumably filled with the rations Stev mentioned. As with every storage locker, there were energetic molecules in the ceiling. Having sensed people in the locker, those molecules vibrated until they glowed, producing plenty of light. Obviously there was no way out. Lockers were made to keep things in; even if not locked, the door could only be opened from the outside. They were trapped.

Boris sank to the floor and buried his head in his hands.

"Boris?" said Randa, not knowing what else to say. He'd never seen his friend in despair like this. It produced feelings of discomfort, thoughts he'd rather not confront.

Boris looked up, his face drawn and pathetic. "I was supposed to call the Law once I got with all the others, so the bust could go down and nobody could escape. Everybody's coming here today sometime, and we won't even know when they arrive."

"Well, why not just call them now? That Lisl lady seemed pretty powerful. Is she important?"

Boris nodded, but he didn't brighten any. "The thing about these people, see, is even though they're maniacs bent on the destruction of the Stars, they're nowhere near stupid. You can't tell the difference because of your birthday and all, but they've put a limiter on us."

"A limiter. That's..."

"That's what you've got on you, what closes us down for our birthdays, but this is a wide-coverage, nondiscriminating one.

We're both cut down to crib service, time, and general PA stuff. Hey, congratulate me, I messed up good."

Randa sat down next to his friend. "You didn't mess up, Boris. They're more paranoid than you thought, that's all."

"I didn't want to get you locked up for two days, buddy, honest. I wanted you to feel better about yourself, that's all."

Randa patted the Editor's arm. "I'm not sorry, Boris. Really, I'm not; now don't give me that look. It's true, I wasn't feeling very good about myself. I doubted whether I was fulfilling my proper destiny in the world, wondered if I shouldn't quit the Order and be a Rationalist. Yeah, I know, but that wasn't the most drastic thought I've had today. I even thought about getting myself changed a little, being half a horse or something."

Boris smirked. "The bottom half, please. And don't wear any pants after. Ha!"

"You pervert! But seriously, now I'm not all depressed or doubtful. I know exactly who I am and where my place is in the world, and I'm loving it. I'm a Worshiper, a representative of the great and wonderful Rainbow Stars, an instrument of their bidding."

"And you're trapped here with little old me."

"All because some lunatics think they hear signals from space. Aliens, indeed!"

"Randa?"

There was a quiet element to Boris's voice that caused Randa to squint at him. "Eh?"

"The signals are real. They let me hear. They really do come from beyond the Rainbow Stars, beyond the Moon, even. They're ordered, logical—sent by some intelligent source."

"Oh." Randa stared at a wall for a while. "The Sanctity Act is still in effect, though. It's all about interference to the Stars from within or without, so the existence of the signals doesn't make any difference. We still need to take these people down."

"Right. Sure thing. We'll bust through the wall right after supper." Boris rose with a huff of air, plodded over to the boxes, and started examining them. "How do you get these things open?"

"Don't worry about those, Boris. You'll be eating with Max tonight."

"Oh, no! The air must not be coming in; you're starting to rant and rave. Wild hallucinations come next, and after that you'll attack me like a wild animal."

"Not so, my furry friend. In a minute I'll be hooked to the Rainbow Stars, and we'll be going away from here."

Boris stopped trying to figure out how to open the box and sat down on it instead. "How's that going to happen? Little boy, are you keeping secrets from your big brother?"

Randa grinned at him. He stood and raised his hands over his head, looked to where his fingers were pointing. "They're right up there, and only a limiter is blocking us. Those limiters can be pretty frustrating sometimes. They can cut off almost anybody."

"Seems like just about everybody, if you ask me."

Randa aimed his grin down at his friend. "There's not a limiter made that can stop a Worshiper at full capacity."

Confusion danced a little jig across Boris's face. "But, your birthday. I thought..."

"It takes hundreds of limiters working as one to cut us off. This one little one here—it's nothing."

Boris stood. "How does that help us, though? You've still got hours of your birthday left."

"There's a clause in the Order's agreement with Satellite Control. Because many of us are dependent upon our contact with the Stars, can't sleep or eat or sit without fidgeting like an idiot without their touch, provision has been made for us to renounce our right to a day without duty on our birthdays. It's an irrevocable right, accessible any time of any day, even after our birthday limitation has started."

Boris took a step forward, his eyes going wide. "You mean, you ..."

"I mean, I can give up my birthday, get connected with the Stars again. Right now."

standing there in that spot. The lone figure looked up, and Randa put his own face where the shadow had been. Raising hands to the sky, Randa in the vision began to sing "Happy Birthday." The crowd vanished. Around him a ring of quiet Worshipers appeared, their hoods darkening their features.

One of the Worshipers stepped forward, asked if he wished to forsake his birthday, then stepped back into the circle. Randa said yes. Another stepped up to ask why he'd want to do such a foolish thing. Randa said so he would not be bothered again by a break in service to the Stars. He was asked by another to give the correct access code. He thought of a vast field of wheat gently blowing in the red sunset on a late summer day in Kansas. Following that was the smell of freshly baked bread, then the feeling

**"Be quiet, woman! if there's a traitor
here, it's you. trying to escape the stars!
what WERE you thinking?"**

Randa was glad the walls of the locker were made of a sound-dampening material; otherwise, the whoop of joy Boris let out surely would have brought somebody to investigate. His friend swooped forward and snared Randa in a bear hug that crushed the air out of him.

"Boris? Boris!"

"What?" Boris held Randa at arm's length.

"You gotta find a better shampoo, buddy. That fur—phew!"

Boris tussled Randa's hair, guffawing. He acted like he was going to crush Randa again, but suddenly stopped. "Hey, Randa, this birthday thing. Is it reversible?"

Randa shook his head. "Once renounced, I won't have a birthday. It's my decision to make, but only once."

Boris plopped back on the box. "Then you can't do it. You can't give up your one chance for a day of quiet reflection. You'll need that renewal from time to time."

"Boris, I'm not only ready to give up my birthday, but my life, too, for the safety of the Rainbow Stars. A hundred billion people count on the Stars to get them through every day of life. If I'm not here to do my job, the interface between Stars and humans won't work, and we'll wind up with nothing but technological chaos. The very least I could do for that cause is give up one day of rest a year. And anyway, aside from today, they've all been kind of boring. There's not that much I'll be missing."

Boris gave a sober nod. "I wish you had a little more time to think about it. But unless we can find out what's going on out there, this threat might get away. You promise you'll still come to visit me once you become the birthdayless boy?"

"You're the other thing I couldn't live my life without, Boris. . . . Ha, look at you blush! Now quiet, I need to concentrate."

Randa blinked once or twice, trying to clear his thoughts of worries about life and duty and whether it was possible that human life was all there was in the universe. Presently he drew up a mental image of a vast crowd of people huddled together in a large open area. In the center of the crowd he envisioned a clear spot, and then one lone figure covered by a familiar chartreuse Worshiper's robe, the face nothing but a black hole in the hood,

of his tongue meeting the tip of a freshly broken piece of ice. A blister on his left heel followed, and following that was the color of vomit, but *not* the smell. A chorus of bells playing "Happy Birthday." At last he saw the circle of Worshipers once again.

The Worshipers faded to black, which then slowly became the interior of the storage locker. Boris looked at him expectantly.

A thought, and Randa was one with the Rainbow Stars. He felt as if his body were a satellite, flinging him along in his orbit, swerving around the shunt fields of his fellow satellites. He must have been in one of the lower orbits, because the view of the planet below was unobstructed. Looking closely at New York hugging the side of the great Atlantic, the hazy terminator bringing night swooping across those choppy waves, he wondered where he was. The view automatically took him closer, homing in on the westernmost edge of the vast city, the part that wouldn't see the coming night for five hours yet. Closer, to a complex of industrial buildings, and finally to one particular structure.

He saw Boris again. "I know where we are." Data about that fed into him. "There are thirty-seven people in this building with us. That's a lot more than when we came in."

"It certainly is. Can you tell what their names are?"

"Do the Stars orbit?" replied Randa, giving the common, flippant answer used to indicate an obvious truth. He recited some of the names that came to him.

"That's them! The leaders of the coalition. Randa, call the Law!"

Randa was already doing just that. The switchboard operator, as was their wont, gave him a hard time for about half a second, then shut up and did what Randa said when he gave his Worshiper's authority code.

He relaxed and sat down on the other box, facing Boris.

"Well? Tell me what's going on, little man."

"The Law is on its way, big man. Mission accomplished. I told them you helped me round up these criminals, and everybody's really happy with you, Boris."

"Ah, shucks! Randa, you simply must come over to our place for a bona fide congratulatory feast tonight."

"Can't. I've got somebody to go see. But . . . Hey, the Law is here!"

"They are? I don't hear anything." Boris nonetheless stood and faced the door.

It melted out of existence in a moment, and there stood, of all people, the enormous policewoman Randa had seen earlier that day, the one who'd carted away the crazy man. Her eyes burned as she received information about them. "Randa Ritenoire and Boris Lightowler, come on out here," she ordered them.

The room was full of people, all coupled up, police officers cuffing or leading out prisoners. A buzz of conversation filled the air.

The policewoman glared at him. "Well, you might have told me you were in on this operation."

Randa said, "Until a little while ago, I didn't know it existed, Officer Roget."

Telling Officer Roget her name without her offering it got the desired result—she turned with a huff and waded through the thinning group of cops and crooks toward the door.

With a sigh, Boris said, "What a woman. You know, I could almost go hetero for a woman like that."

Randa raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I could give you her number."

Boris smiled. "I said almost. Besides, who has time for women? I've got some catching up to do at work, what with all this gallivanting around town we've been doing. And then there's this guy named Max. . . ."

"Yeah, sure, yeah."

The policewoman was suddenly back, pulling the sulking Lisl alongside her. The prisoner saw Boris and snarled.

"Boris, you traitor! You've condemned us all to death."

Boris drew himself up to his full height. "Be quiet, woman! If there's a traitor here, it's you. Trying to escape the Stars! What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about meeting our alien friends, Boris, about exploring the possibility that we don't really know it all. You were, too, or at least that's what you told us. Don't deny the evidence you heard, Boris. The signal was real."

"The only thing that's real is the fact that I won't have to look at you or hear your diatribe any more, Lisl. Hey, why don't you just get out of here? Signals, indeed!"

Officer Roget gave a nod and hauled Lisl out the door.

With nothing more to do, the two friends made their way to the street. At the crib stop, they turned to face each other.

"Thanks for the lovely day," said Randa. "Really, Boris, thanks. You helped me straighten some things out. I appreciate it."

Boris shrugged. "It's an Editor's job to straighten out the reading public. Now come here, tiny one, the crib's on its way."

Randa allowed himself to suffer through another of Boris's crushing hugs, made a sarcastic remark about his smelly fur, then waved good-bye as the crib rushed away with his friend. Randa stood alone.

No, not alone. Never alone, never again, for the Rainbow

Stars would be his constant companions until the day he died. That was completely acceptable to him.

He found a tall building and went up. It was an easy thing for a Worshiper to gain access to the roof of any building in the world. He probably could have mounted a Law building, or perhaps the Headquarters of Satellite Control, had he wanted to. But on top of this simple building full of common flats, he found what he needed.

The clouds cleared as if in answer to his private desires. The full beauty and glory of the Rainbow Stars smiled down upon the city. Randa sighed with great contentment.

He wondered if, beyond those orbiting friends, on the other side of that shield of technology, there were actually living aliens trying to contact the creatures scurrying about on this blue world. He believed Boris thought so, and the members of the coalition believed it beyond a doubt. They believed it enough to risk their lives to go see those aliens. If it were ever found to be true, Randa would gladly risk his life to keep them away.

And he would never again doubt his place in the workings of the Stars.

The words of the Litany of Keeping came easily to his lips. "O wondrous Rainbow Stars, keep us from evil. Keep us from the dark ages of oppressed knowledge. Keep us from the asteroids that would crush us from without, and the maelstrom weather that would destroy us from within. Keep us warm and well fed. Keep our minds open to any new thought you pass our way. Keep us to your bosom, for ours alone is not sufficient for love." He sighed, then added a few words from his own heart. "And keep us safe from the hostile beings of the universe."

Idly, he scratched at a spot on the back of his hand. ☾



about the author

Christian Campbell currently is on staff at a group home for developmentally disabled adults. He has worked as a painter, as a factory worker, and in Army intelligence, among other jobs, although what he really wants to be is a full-time writer.

"The Reign of Rainbow Stars" is his first sale and was written immediately after he read Ben Bova's The Craft of Writing Science Fiction that Sells. Bova's advice obviously worked for him. He says that the thirtieth anniversary of man's first walk on the moon led him to "ponder how we've turned from physically exploring the cosmos to sending our technological emissaries instead. My imaginary world covered in satellites is one possible result."

Campbell lives with his partner in Seattle.



about the illustrator

IN HIS OWN WORDS: "My name is Vance Ypsilanti. I grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts. I attended UMASS/Amherst, where I double majored in English and Northern Psychology. I have two sisters, Wag and Jerri. In 1989, I was recommended by my pastor for a full-time doodling position with The Glandy, a nationally distributed newspaper published in Orange County, California. During this time, I traveled to the former USSR several times. I got to make a lot of 'friends' from Ukraine and Russia. In 1993, I moved to Melbourne, Florida, a nice beach community just south of Cape Canaveral. My house is close enough to actually feel the rockets taking off. In my spare time, I enjoy fossil hunting, standing, and disk golf."



AMANDA HALEY sat in the corner of the dimly lit cell with her knees tucked to her chest, concentrating with fixed purpose on the locked door across the room.

A voice inside her head (that nagging voice she always chose to ignore) reminded her that she had tried to force the lock for the past several days and failed . . . so why should this time be any different?

Amanda drove the voice out of her mind. As she did, she felt the mechanism inside the lock give slightly . . . then the sensation was gone. Amanda exhaled heavily.

In the week since her capture Amanda had heard, day by day,

It was no use. She felt her energies being dampened, diluted somehow, making the strain of concentrating on the lock nearly unbearable. It wasn't just fatigue; *they* were interdicting. Her brain felt as if a thick, heavy blanket had been stretched across it. She tried to relax, to think of better times—times when the only monsters in her life were human.

She tried to tell herself that she was being kept alive for a reason; that whatever these creatures held in store for her, she would be able to survive or at least have a chance of escape.

Just then the lights dimmed even more, flickering several times before slowly returning to their former dull state of illumination. *Last call*, said that voice inside her mind. She forced the voice away, concentrating once more on the situation at hand.

One fact she felt sure of was that the purpose of her being here was related to her ability. This certainly wasn't the first time her "gift" had drawn the attention of others. She focused one last burst of effort on the lock without result. Then, exhaling deeply and resting her forehead against her knees, Amanda thought of the past . . . and wondered if she would live to see the future.

DARKNESS ENVELOPED the Zerg Queen as she entered the long, desolate corridor.

The blackness, however, was not absolute. A circle of light like a full moon loomed at the passageway's end. The symbolism that could be drawn from this particular atmosphere was not lost on the Queen—trite, outlandish

notions such as transcendence, passage to an afterlife, or even rebirth, just to name a few. A half-smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Such musings need not occupy her mind. They were wretchedly sentimental; but far worse than that, they were also inextricably . . . *human*.

The circle of light grew larger and finally gave way to a catwalk overlooking a massive, gloomy chamber. The catwalk itself was a stark contrast to its immediate surroundings. Much of the orbiting platform's infrastructure and processes (including electrical power and artificial gravity, the latter of which her kind had little use for) were still functional despite the station's assimilation by the Zerg. Her Brood had simply taken what the humans had built and adapted it to suit their means. And was it not efficient to do so? The Queen certainly thought it was. Adapting was something she had been doing her entire life.

The creature who had once been known as Sarah Kerrigan stood, observing. On either side of her position, sinuous cords snaked out to the center of the room. Similar cordage adorned the three adjoining walls and trailed across the ceiling and

HYBRID

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BY MICKY NEILSON

cell doors in the hall outside phasing open. She had heard the cries and pleas of her fellow crew members as they were led to whatever godforsaken fate awaited them. The sounds of those phasing doors and woeful pleas had plagued what few minutes of sleep she was able to manage each night. But most disconcerting of all was the fact that, day by day, those sounds were growing closer.

She knew it was only a matter of time before the lock on her door would disengage, and that door would phase open (*They won't disengage the lock with their finger, not like a human would*, she thought with a shudder), and the creatures would take her. They would take her and they would—

Just focus on the lock.

Although she could not physically see the lock, she could picture it perfectly in her mind. She had spent two cycles as a medic on board an orbiting platform, assisting patients in cells not too different from this one. Gathering her strength once more, she closed her eyes and imagined the lock; imagined the disengage button giving way under her invisible finger. . . .



I L L U S T R A T I O N B Y S A M W I S E

down, like the massive web of some impossible spider. The cords pulsed and heaved with peristaltic motion, making the chamber seem alive.

Suspended at the center of this morass was an expansive, amniotic sac. The liquid inside the membranous enclosure sloshed slowly back and forth, making the sac sway drunkenly. Inside the cocoon, surging cords wrapped around a human host like the roots of a strangler tree, winding their way into the nostrils and mouth of the subject.

The voice of the Cerebrate invaded the Queen's mind: *Preparations are complete.*

The Queen's unwavering eyes stared at the human subject within the cocoon.

Commence, she replied telepathically.

The subject lurched once, then fell still as the hyperevolutionary virus was fed into him.

The Queen looked at a bank of suspended monitors to the immediate left of her position. The monitors offered views of the various containment cells and the human animals occupying them.

Her eyes traveled to one of the monitors on the far left, where a young, blonde-haired woman sat in the corner of

her cell. Her demeanor was unlike that of the others; this one seemed intent on something, as if she still clung to hope. *What a waste*, thought the Queen. Still, there was something about her. The Queen remembered a time when she had inhabited a cell of her own. It seemed like an eternity had passed since then, since she had been so vulnerable, so naive . . . so human.

"CEASE YOUR sniveling!" shouted Lieutenant Rumm as he leaned closer. "Pity and weakness are synonymous. Remorse is forbidden. Compunction is forbidden. Do you understand?"

Young Sarah Kerrigan wiped at her cheek and returned Rumm's stare with mild defiance. She sat at the sterile, metallic table, both hands resting placidly on its surface. A dark-colored brand on her forearm, marking her as specimen number 24, stood out against her pale skin.

"It is my job to break you, child. And that's exactly what I intend to do." The lieutenant began pacing.

"Cease your sniveling!" shouted Lieutenant Rumm as he leaned closer. "Pity and weakness are synonymous. Remorse is forbidden."

Sarah had scored highly on all phases of the psi-evals despite the fact that she was only eight years old. At this point she was physically just a shade of the beautiful woman she would eventually become. Shy and somewhat gawky, she was gifted by a symmetry that would, with time and under the proper conditions, produce a stunning example of a human being.

It was Lieutenant Rumm's job to peel away the girl's aspect, layer by layer, until he came to what he knew lay beneath: an incredible, innate power shared by a select few and almost never evident at such a tender age. The girl had displayed this power only once, but that single episode had been more than enough to send her father into a downward spiral of insanity and land her unfortunate mother a spot in the TarKossian morgue.

This raw, formidable ability was much like the child herself: a wholly undeveloped source of potential, a gift that would grow and mature with age. It fell to the Confederacy to influence the girl's ability in a way that would suit its needs. And in order to achieve such a goal, the lieutenant knew full well that the first stumbling block he must overcome was the girl's judgment—her ability to distinguish between what she had come to believe was right and wrong.

Hence, the kitten: a cute little animal that the girl had been allowed to play with and grow close to over the past three weeks. This particular "cute" little bundle of fur was now suffering from a malignant tumor, a growth implanted in the animal by the science department. Lieutenant Rumm gestured toward



the kitten, which lay prone, breathing in long, shuddery gasps.

"Obviously, the animal's condition will result in death—a slow and, I'm sure, a painful one. You alone can end its suffering. You know this, and so do I. These games will avail you nothing. Trying to hide your ability is senseless and futile. Now do as you've been told."

Just then a long, wailing scream echoed from somewhere outside the room. The voice rose to a pitch, then came to a sudden, abrupt halt. Silence followed.

"I won't," the girl replied.

"That wasn't a request. It was an order, and failure to execute that order will have dire consequences. Do it, child. I am growing weary, so do it now." The lieutenant's thinly veiled anger was beginning to surface. He stopped pacing once again.

"No."

The lieutenant's left eyebrow twitched. He took a deep breath, then said. "One last time—"

"No! I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Circling behind the table, the lieutenant drew his weapon—a standard-issue repeating pistol—and lowered it to the kitten's head.

He spoke in a calm voice. "End the animal's life, or I'll do it for you."

A fresh tear fell from the girl's right eye. The lieutenant felt the pistol in his hand waver slightly—or was that his imagination?

"I said no. If you don't know what that means, then go ahead and shoot."

The lieutenant smiled. This was going to be fun indeed.

"I'm afraid that won't do, little one, won't do at all. No easy way out for you, child."

The lieutenant lowered his weapon.

"We're through for today."

Behind the little girl, a door opened silently. Stepping down, the child glanced briefly at the kitten and wiped her cheek before leaving the room.

Lieutenant Rumm stood motionless, hands clasped behind his back. A skittish man dressed in white stepped into the room. The lieutenant glanced briefly in the tech's direction.

"Shall we recommend employing a neuro-adjuster?"

"Not yet." The lieutenant wanted to save that unpleasantness until last. He knew that allowing an adjuster to meddle in the girl's brain could kill the patient. The science, after all, was not yet exact . . . and their methods were questionable, to say the least.

"Perhaps they're wrong about her," said the tech.

"I doubt that," the lieutenant replied. Still, he wasn't sure. The proof would come, however; it would come later that evening, as the lieutenant went about the nightly routine of polishing his boots, ironing his uniform, and cleaning his weapon . . . for he would find that the triggering mechanism of his standard-issue repeating pistol had been melted to a lump.

AMANDA LAY curled in a fetal position in the corner of her cell. She had stopped concentrating on the lock three nights ago, but not because she had given up. She had simply come to the

conclusion that if she could save her strength, somehow ferret away a reserve of her energies, then perhaps—just perhaps—she would have enough in store for one small, final attempt at freedom. But the timing would have to be just right.

Last night she heard the sound she had dreaded would come—the crackling, electrical sound of the access door in the room next to hers phasing open. She heard muffled cries, pleading, and a brief struggle. *Oh, my God, Henderson, they're taking Henderson*, she had thought to herself. Just a few hours ago, the lights in her cell had dimmed and flickered ominously once again.

You're next, said the voice within her. She told the voice to shut up. It was the voice of weakness, and she refused to listen. Not while she still drew breath. She had seen her share of hard times, of turmoil and tribulation, but she had persevered through the worst of it. She would find a way out of this, or die trying.

Amanda hugged her arms close and lay in the darkness of the cell, waiting.

THE QUEEN was disappointed.

The slobbering, insensate monstrosity before her was a useless failure. And so more adjustments to the formula were made. How long would this take? Soon they would run out of subjects, although it would be a small matter to procure more. Still, the lack of progress, the lack of activity, annoyed her. She would much rather be engaged in some desperate battle on foreign soil than babysitting lab rats on this derelict platform.

She reminded herself of the possibilities, of the potential that lay in the experiments.

The metamorphosis had taken only two days in the latest of the experiments—far shorter than the Queen's own gestation period had been. But, thus far, they had been unable to duplicate the result of her change. The Queen's situation had been unique, resulting in a being who retained the mental faculties and psychic abilities particular to specific humans, while at the same time inheriting the Zerg traits of regeneration and near-invulnerability—in short, a perfect creation.

The Queen knew it would be impossible to reconstruct such a magnificent being as she. But if they could just come close. . . . The Zerg had long been fascinated by the human psychic potential, and coveted it; coveted it the way a land-bound organism might look to a winged creature and covet flight.

So far, all attempts had ended in failure. The human subjects, after the transformation, would awaken brain-dead and invalid—horribly malformed anomalies like the one before her now. Each time, however, adjustments in the formula were made; each time she felt they were getting closer.

The voice of the Cerebrate coursed once more through her mind: *Refinements complete. Incompatibility with subjects possessing subordinate gene pattern. Ramifications of gene pattern/formula codependence are currently being assessed.*

Interesting, thought the Queen. Perhaps some progress was being made after all.

She scanned the monitor bank, her eyes falling on the monitor displaying the cell of the next candidate. It was the young woman. The girl had hardly moved in the past three days. Perhaps she had given up after all; perhaps she wasn't as strong as the Queen had thought.

She telepathically called one of the workers from below. The aberrant creature stepped forth out of the shadows. It was a mutated, almost reptilian being that at one time may have been human. The worker did not meet the Queen's penetrating gaze.

"Bring out the young female subject," she said. "Her time has come."

THE TUMOR on the kitten's neck had now grown to three times its original size. The rise and fall of the animal's rib cage as it breathed was almost indiscernible.

Sarah sat staring at the kitten through bleary eyes. Lieutenant Rumm smiled. Somewhere outside the room, a patient shrieked unintelligibly.

Lieutenant Rumm reached into his pocket, withdrawing a fused clump of metal. He threw the mass onto the table, where it landed with a heavy thud.

"Do you know what this is?"

No answer.

"It used to be a trigger assembly. The trigger assembly to my weapon, to be exact. The possibility of this happening without outside interference—such as a plutonium leak, let's say—is about a thousand to one. I brought this matter before my superiors, but the trigger mechanism itself wasn't enough to convince them. They require incontrovertible evidence. And so our game continues."

The lieutenant began pacing. Sarah thought it a wonder that he had not yet worn a permanent rut in the floor.

"I am convinced beyond a doubt that your ability was the cause of this. You used it to neutralize my weapon, yet refuse to use it on the tumor. Why?"

Silence.

"I have my own theories, of course. I believe you refuse to channel your ability into anything organic because of what you did to your mother."

At this Sarah looked up, her eyes suddenly very wide.

"What did she do, child, send you to bed without supper? Chastise you? Yell at you?"

Number 24 looked down slightly.

"Ah, she yelled at you. And so you used your ability to try and make her stop. And what happened next, hmm?"

Tears began to run down the girl's cheeks.

"Massive cerebral hemorrhaging, as I remember. I spoke to your father, who saw the whole thing happen. He would say only one thing, over and over. Do you know what that one thing was?"

Sarah closed her eyes.

"He said, 'I saw her head come apart.'"

The girl bolted to a standing position, her hands balled into white, tiny fists at her sides, her voice breaking as she screamed: "I'll never use it on anyone ever again, and you can't make me! You can't make me!"

A door on the side of the room opened, and two men dressed in sealed flak armor emerged. They grabbed the girl by her arms and feet and dragged her through the main doorway and down the hall.

Lieutenant Rumm stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his head lowered in thoughtful consideration.

On the table not far away, the little kitten exhaled one final,

quavering breath and was still. The lieutenant did not notice.



AMANDA COULD feel the moment drawing near. She told herself not to look when the creature stepped through the doorway. The distraction would be too much. She could not afford to have her focus interrupted. She prayed that whatever dampening field these monstrosities held over her was not wholly unyielding.

A noise, intermittent and barely audible, came from the hallway outside. It was a sound she didn't immediately recognize. Then, with dawning horror, she identified what the sound was—it was *slithering*.

The noise drew undeniably closer. Amanda shut her eyes tight and forced all nonessential thoughts from her mind. *Time's up*, said a tormenting, childish voice inside her. *End of the line*.

Amanda took a deep breath, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. She hoped against hope that the voice inside her was wrong. *No more thoughts. Clean the slate, Amanda, and steel yourself...*

As the lights began to flicker, Amanda heard the crackling sound of the door across from her phasing open.

THE QUEEN glanced over at the monitor bank as the cocoon underwent preparation. Her eyes, growing wider, were fixed on the monitor displaying the young woman's cell as the lights inside began returning to half power. She could not believe what she was seeing.

The worker had stopped in the doorway, tentaclelike appendages clutching at either side of its cranium. As she continued to watch, captivated, the worker crumpled to the floor, its head *expanding*.

Unwelcome memories rushed back to the Queen in a flood: the image of her mother clutching at her temples and scream-

She had simply underestimated the girl, had lumped her in with all the rest of her kind—human beings made inferior by fear and emotional dependence. But, as the Queen had suspected once before, this one was different. The Queen could not help but feel a kind of... respect.

Telepathically summoning one of the warriors to follow, the Queen stepped out of the elevator and into the hangar level. Now that her instincts had been reawakened, the Queen was fairly certain that the female was intelligent enough to hope that some of her race's craft had been left in the hangar. Of course, all such nonessentials had been jettisoned long ago, but the subject did not know that.

And so the Queen proceeded to the only lift connecting the cell-block level with the hangar level. She stood in front of the doors, waiting. She heard an engine winding down, gears grinding, a gush of hydraulic steam... then the doors before her opened, and she looked into the eyes of Amanda Haley.

AMANDA FELT her heart sink. The creature standing before her must surely be the leader of the monstrosities. The characteristics that marked her as alien—from her luminescent yellow eyes and olive skin to the spindly blades protruding from her back and shoulders—also served to mask something beneath: features that suggested that this creature had not only been human at one time, but had been attractive as well.

Glancing briefly over the creature's shoulder, Amanda could see that the hangar was empty. Any hope of escaping this place was instantly dashed. *Don't give up. Not yet*, she told herself, forcing her eyes to meet those of the alien being before her.

"I applaud your effort, though it was in vain," said the Queen. "I am Kerrigan, matriarch of the Zerg. I would know your name."

"Just go ahead and get it over with," retorted Amanda.

"Oh, we shall." The Queen smiled. The girl remained defiant even in the face of unquestionable defeat. The Queen was reminded so much of herself that for a moment she felt—

There has been a setback, Queen? interrupted the Cerebrate.

Not at all, she responded. *Merely an intriguing turn of events.*

I trust the operation will continue to run smoothly, answered the Cerebrate.

Put your trust where you will, returned the Queen. *The schedule I adhere to is mine alone.*

Just then the warrior arrived. The Queen sent a message. The creature obeyed, wrapping a snakelike cord around Amanda's throat with one appendage and restraining her arms with the other.

Amanda closed her eyes, hoping that whatever the creature did, it would be quick.

A diminutive, spiked tentacle wriggled out from under the creature's skin. Amanda felt a prick as the spike-needle pierced one of the tiny veins at her wrist.

The warrior stood still for a moment, then turned its head in the direction of the Queen.

Genetic strain incompatible, it relayed telepathically.

The Queen nodded.

Then the formula will likely be ineffective, offered the Cerebrate.

**"I applaud your effort, though it was in vain,"
said the Queen. "I am Kerrigan, matriarch of
the Zerg. I would know your name."**

ing; her father observing with eyes full of horrific revulsion at first, then only with blankness; the sound of her mother's skull splitting open...

The Queen shut her blazing eyes tight, then reopened them, fixated once again on the current crisis.

The young woman inside the cell was gone. The worker was now lying still, its lifeblood oozing from a rupture in its skull and spreading across the metallic tiles.

The Queen took the catwalk in the opposite direction of the monitors, toward the cargo bay access lift. Once there, she stepped in and pressed the button marked HANGARS 1-12.

How could this have happened? she asked herself, even as she answered the question.

The Queen knew. Most likely the process would result in failure, stripping the woman of any shred of humanity, rendering her a base, servile mutation for the rest of her days. The brave girl would become a thoughtless, debilitated drone.

You wish to proceed, Queen? asked the Cerebrate.

The Queen hesitated.

Queen . . . ?

THIS ROOM was new. Sarah had not been taken to this place before. She sat bound to a chair with reinforced restraints, facing Lieutenant Rumm, who paced back and forth before a blank wall.

The lieutenant stopped pacing and lowered his somber gaze to the little girl. "I want you to know that you forced me to do this. It was not my intention to take this course of action."

Sarah stared back, impassive.

With an electric hissing sound, the solid wall behind the lieutenant phased into transparency, affording a view of an adjacent room, not unlike the one Sarah was in. Bound in a chair similar to Sarah's, and facing her, was the emaciated form of Patrick Kerrigan, her father.

She had been able to visit him only once since "the incident." He had appeared then much as he did now—staring forward, not looking at Sarah but through her, with wide, unseeing eyes.

Sarah felt her throat swell. Her eyes grew bleary.

Standing next to Patrick was a tech holding a pressurized syringe in his right hand. The sleeve on Patrick's right arm had been rolled up; veins stood out like ropes along his scrawny forearm.

"The serum in the syringe is the same that was injected into our little friend the kitten," the lieutenant said in a matter-of-fact tone. "If you do not agree to cooperate with us fully from now on, your father will be injected."

Sarah's brow creased, her lips becoming a thin line.

"You do remember what happened to the kitten," said the lieutenant, drawing nearer. "Death will not come quickly, child—no, not at all. It will be a marathon of suffering, even to such a dull-witted specimen as he."

The lieutenant was leaning over Sarah's chair now, both hands planted firmly on the armrests, waiting for a response. Looking in the little girl's eyes, he saw fear, pity, and agony . . . but not compliance.

"So be it," he said. Setting his jaw, the lieutenant turned to the window and nodded his head.

Inside the adjacent room, the tech placed the syringe to Patrick's arm.

"No! If you do this, I'll use my power to kill him and me!" Sarah's wide, furious eyes turned to the lieutenant. "I'll do it—I swear I will! I'll kill both of us!"

Suddenly Sarah felt a prick in her wrist. A needle in the arm of the chair had punctured her skin, delivering a powerful sedative into her bloodstream. Sarah felt fire flow in her veins, and the room began to go dark. The last thing she saw was her father's haggard, uncomprehending face and those wide, oblivious eyes.

The lieutenant breathed a sigh of relief as Sarah's chin slumped to her chest. He turned and made a brief vertical motion with his hand. The tech nodded and removed the syringe. The wall shimmered and became opaque once more.

The lieutenant stood looking at the little girl, his emotions conflicting. He did not relish the decision that he must now make, but he was an animal of the Confederacy, and ever since he was a child he had always bowed to the wishes of superiors, be they right or wrong. A neuro-adjuster would be employed. He would recommend it. The little girl would never be the same again.

THE QUEEN stood once more overlooking the massive, gloomy chamber, waiting for the cocoon to open. The decision to continue had not been an easy one. But then again, why should she care for the welfare of some human subject, brave or not? *Because of the potential*, she told herself. *There's still a possibility . . .*

Metamorphosis complete, interjected the Cerebrate.

The Queen watched as the bottom of the sac opened up, spilling its contents onto the floor below. There, huddling and shivering in a fetal position, was what remained of Amanda Haley: a slobbering, malformed, half-Zerg, half-human genetic defect.

The Queen sighed, sending a telepathic message for the creature to stand, which it immediately obeyed, struggling to an upright position, on shaky, alien limbs.

Another drone, thought the Queen. *Her mind belongs to the Swarm now. The potential is wasted.*

As suspected, the formula was incompatible, offered the Cerebrate.

The Queen nodded. The Cerebrate had a way of stating the obvious. Looking down at her arm, the woman who had once been known as Sarah Kerrigan could see the faintest traces of an old mark—a scar, really—that still glistened despite the molecular changes her body had undergone. It read "24."

"So be it," whispered Kerrigan as she spun on her heel and stepped once more into the long, desolate corridor. 🐾



about the author

Micky Neilson is an award-winning scriptwriter who is currently developing numerous projects, including *Descent* and *The God Project*, with his writing partner

Samwise Didier. Over the past five years Neilson has collaborated on storylines for many of Blizzard Entertainment's top-selling games.

Neilson lives in Mission Viejo, California, with his wooden dummy and three beautiful cats.



about the illustrator

For the past eight years, Samwise Didier has been art director for Blizzard Entertainment and has defined the art styles of PC games like *Warcraft II*, *Starcraft*, and *Warcraft III*.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Sam has worked to hone his dynamic illustrative style. In between raising three daughters and his amateur career as a Neil Diamond impersonator, Sam spends his free time drawing and playing video games. Sam's first published works outside of the game industry were presented in *AMAZING Stories* issue 596 for the short story "Starcraft: Revelations."

*A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with Science
and other stuff that's really hard to understand.*



ASK DR. SCIENCE™

November 1999 *R. S. of Chimbote, Peru, would like a reasonable answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, I'm saving up for one of those new robot dogs they're selling now. Do you plan to get one, too?

Dear R. S.: Not on your life, pal. Okay, it can walk, wag its tail, see, go to sleep and even sing, and this puppy's cute as it can be. It gets happy and mad. It begs, lies down, gets up, and kicks its feet. If I had one, the other thing it would do is drive my cat nuts.

Granted, it doesn't take much to drive a cat nuts, considering where it starts. Cats have severe mental problems as a basic genetic trait. All my cat needs to

push it over the edge is a chrome-plated dog around the house.

And after the doggie, what? Robot gerbils? Robot aquariums with robot fish? The mind boggles. Once you get started on stuff like this, there's no way to stop.

If I ever do get a mechanical pet, it'll have to be a cat. If they make them authentic, they'll be a lot cheaper than the dog. Cats have no moving parts, and won't do anything at all.

October 1943 *E. R. of Riddle, Oregon, asks:*

Dr. Science, I read somewhere that researchers have learned that each nostril smells things

differently. Can you tell me why this happens?

Dear E. R.: Because it does, okay? Seriously, though, the right half and the left half of your brain split up the work in a number of ways. Stereo smelling is one of the things they do.

What this means is you get a keener, broader sense of smell. This ability is useful in several ways. If you're looking for someplace to eat, you can smell the greasburgers on one side of the street, and chicken fat on the other, and maybe decide to get a salad instead. Industry has made use of this double-sniff effect on a number of occasions. This is how the Reeses people came up

with the idea of putting chocolate and peanut butter together. It also gave someone the idea for fish tacos, and I wish they hadn't done that.

June 1993 *T. M. of Maraguape, Brazil, would like the answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, I'm familiar with organ banks, where they collect livers, hearts, kidneys and other vital organs for transplanting. However, I recently learned that there are also brain banks. I had no idea medical technology had advanced this far.

Dear T. M.: You're absolutely right. We are not yet able to transplant brains from one human to another. The brain banks you refer to collect brains from the departed for research, to help scientists in the very important study of Alzheimer's, manic-depression, Lou Gehrig's disease, and other afflictions.

Recently I donated my brother-in-law Augustus Finch's brain to Science, because I felt he was one of the most unusual people I've ever known. Augustus was quite irritated when the medical people came to get his brain, as he is still alive and running Finch's Indian Restaurant & Transmission Shop in Nacogdoches, Texas. I don't think he knows I did this. I hope he doesn't find out, because my car is in his shop, and I eat there from time to time.



August 1934 R. O. of West Swazney, New Hampshire, asks:

Dr. Science, in the last issue of *AMAZING Stories*, you answered a question about the woolly mammoth that would soon be lifted out of ice and stored in a Siberian cave for study. Now that this has been accomplished, will they start digging up more mammoths? I understand there are still a lot of them up there. Do you have any idea what they plan to do with these frozen creatures? Is there any commercial use for these animals?

Dear R. O.: You deserve a break today at McMammoth's . . .

February 1994 A. M. of Walbryzych, Poland, would like an answer to this inquiry:

Dr. Science, I recently read that new measurements have determined that Mount Everest is actually seven feet higher than the previously accepted elevation. How did the scientists determine this? Dear A. M.: They did it with the help of climbers and a satellite posting system. The newly established elevation is 29,035 feet.

However, that's not the whole story behind this event. The real story was suppressed, to avoid embarrassment, after the news was released.

A veteran Sherpa guide, who was on the scene at the time, has confirmed the fact that a Yeti of fairly average height was standing on the peak of Everest at the time this "new" measurement was taken. As the locals will tell you, after a couple of beers, these creatures love to stand up there and wonder what kind of moron would climb something, just because it's there.

March 1999 E. L. of Yonezawa, Japan, asks:

Dr. Science, I think it's really tragic that the Mars Climate Orbiter apparently crashed on that planet because someone forgot to convert English units into metric. How could such a thing happen?

Dear E. L.: What did I say about the metric system in this magazine's issue number 595? I said it's ridiculous, right? I said the only thing it's good for is to make you look cool when you write science fiction. I said—

Forget it. No one listens to Dr. Science until it's too late. That's the story of my life. If it wasn't for that very small and overblown incident regarding the explosion, I'd still be doing important research, instead of writing this stupid column.

July 1942 T. M. of Wigan, England, asks:

Dr. Science, how much junk is floating around in space? I'll bet it's a lot.

Dear T. M.: One estimate is 9,000 or so bits of debris. If we keep doing this, the space around our planet will be too clogged to even get past it in a century and a half. And that's just a start. If we can get through all that crap, there's a big, beautiful universe out there to trash. And, as a scientist, I'm proud to say that we can do it, too.

October 1997 W. W. wants an answer to this question:

Dr. Science, explain microdot technology.

Dear W. W.: Sure. And thanks for the blunt, discourteous manner in which you asked your questions. In WW II, spies sent messages reduced to the size of a period on this page. (Like that one.) Now, we're able to cram a zillion or so DNA messages in

one period. I just sent you a couple. You'll win a nice prize if you can tell me what they say.

January 2000 A. I. would like an answer to this question:

Dr. Science, I eat out a lot at Thai, Mexican, Chinese, and Indian restaurants. I have never seen any cats, dogs, squirrels, bears, or other mammals while dining in these establishments. Can you tell me why this is so?

Dear A. I.: Are you getting treatment anywhere? Animals don't have any money, pal. I'd think you would already know this. That's one reason these creatures usually eat at home. Another reason is that many eateries that serve hot spicy dishes use chili peppers, which contain the chemical capsaicin. Mammals don't care for hot peppers, so they don't eat them. If they did, they couldn't digest them. Sometimes, Dr. Science can't either, which shows I'm an animal myself.

Moreover, if a moose, say, or a badger did consume capsaicin-loaded foods, their systems would kill the chili's seeds. Birds, now, birds can't even taste the heat, so they eat anywhere they want. And, when they later unload these seeds, new chili plants will grow.

So, A. I., when you see those pesky birds darting about in your favorite restaurant, know that you're watching another surprise from Mother Nature's unending bag of tricks. And, as ever, be prepared to duck.

September 1999 R. R. of Knob Noster, Missouri, asks:

Dr. Science, I'm extremely worried about the Antarctic ice cap, aren't you?

Dear R. R.: Me, too. And for very good reason. The southern polar region contains around ninety percent of the world's ice. If enough of that stuff slid off into the ocean, it would raise coastal levels around the world maybe fifteen or twenty feet. Say

goodbye to your favorite beach. And think about a fun vacation in Jetmore, Kansas, instead of L. A. or New York.

Ice isn't just falling off the top, either. Now, alarming studies show there are ice streams that flow from deep inside the ice cap, and on out to sea.

Is there anything we can do to stop this? Probably not. Sure, we've been spraying those deodorant cans everywhere, but this ice thing isn't all our fault. Ice ages come and go. If they didn't, we might still have all those woolly mammoths around, running through the streets like poodle dogs today. Scooper shovels wouldn't make a dent in a problem like that. Which shows something good comes out of everything.

So we lose New York. I've already been. ☹

All questions appearing in ASK DR. SCIENCE have been adapted from questions sent in by readers to AMAZING Stories over the years, or have been sent to Dr. Science by bill collectors and other mean-spirited persons.

We welcome your questions for this column. But please do not address your questions to Dr. Science himself. Dr. Science knows better than to open his own mail. Address your questions to Neal Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's friend, at AMAZING Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707. Mr. Barrett will see to it that your questions are slipped under Dr. Science's door.



Silver Screen

by cory herndon

Countdown to *Earth*

Travolta's Labor of Love Is a Battlefield

I REMEMBER the first time I saw L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* sitting there on the rack at the H&I Grocery store. It was a monster: 1,066 pages in paperback. Critical lauds cried out from both covers, and the number-one-selling book was "soon to be a major motion picture." The book contained a business reply mail card for the soundtrack to *Battlefield Earth* that touted "the first music ever for a book." This was in 1984.

Battlefield Earth the movie opens May 12, 2000.

Whoever wrote that cover blurb sixteen years ago must have had no idea of the movie row that was about to be hoed. For a fairly straightforward pulp-adventure story about barbaric humans of the future conquering their would-be conquerors, turning *Battlefield Earth* into a movie presented a set of unique challenges. Hard to believe, considering that since its publication in 1982, the book has sold 5 million copies in twenty languages and has appeared on more than four hundred bestseller lists worldwide.

Longtime Hubbard fan John Travolta has been trying to produce a movie based on *Battlefield Earth* for years. What's taken so long to get this project off the ground? How will the film appeal to a mass audience? And why did Travolta wear stilts for nine weeks?

The Heavy

Travolta (*Phenomenon*), found that the role of alien bad guy Terl presented challenges. "He's a very theatrical character, and I purposely made him that way, because I feel his arrogance and

sense of seniority is inflated to no end—and he just plays it to the hilt. He's almost a Shakespearean character."

In fact, Travolta wonders why more actors don't follow his lead over to the dark side. "I think there are delicious roles as villains, and only a few people ever get offered them. In the old days, Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney, Robert Mitchum were playing bad guys. Then as the years wore on, good guys didn't play bad guys so much. I think *Pulp Fiction* turned that around for me, because the audience accepted this guy [Vincent Vega] doing some pretty bad things, and he still appealed to them. I think that gave me the doorway, the opening to do a *Broken Arrow* or a *Face/Off*. If you get the opportunity, if you can get a few of these great villain roles once in a while, you get something special.

"Some actors think you have to like your character, but I've always had this theory that you don't have to *like* your character, you have to make your character entertaining. People don't have to like your character to be entertained. They just have to like watching what your character does.

"That's the take I took on Terl: He's doing the most

wicked things that any person could think of. He's alien, so he gets away with it a little bit more. But he's so *off* the money in so many ways. His inhuman qualities are so outrageous that you find a humorous way to present them. How can someone be so bad? It becomes entertaining. Threatening, but also humorous at the same time."

The film's director, two-time Academy Award-winner Roger Christian, noted that the comedic approach adds to the film's appeal. "John Travolta likes to call the film '*Pulp Fiction* for the Year 3000.' There's this sort of strange comedy there among the Psychlos, for instance. It's not just an effects-laden film, where the effects sort of take over; we're more slaves to the storytelling."

In addition to the acting challenges associated with the part, there were the physical challenges of playing a hulking alien being who can't breathe Earth's atmosphere. Travolta's character, as well as the other Psychlos, required a huge, uncomfortable head apparatus, plus stilts and talons.

"The Psychlo apparatus is an extended head that goes about a foot high, and leans back and shows some skull," Travolta described. "Then there's face applications, eyebrows, Fu Manchu mustaches, and things that are all very time-consuming [to put on]. On a good day it was three hours, on a not-so-good day (meaning I had to take breaks during makeup) it was four. It covered my face, my hands, and the rest is wardrobe. Normally this

Ain't It Cool? Travolta strapped on the villainous role of Terl for *Battlefield Earth*.



wouldn't be so tough, but my headpiece was not removable. For three weeks it was digging into my head a little bit, and I couldn't get any air."

But thanks to Forest Whitaker (*The Crying Game*, *Phenomenon*), who played the pivotal role of Ker—the Only Friendly Psychlo—the actors didn't suffer too long. "One day I see Forest sitting there on the set and with his headpiece removed!" Travolta recalled. "He'd begged his makeup people to figure out a way to cut some of it off and put a clamp in there, so he could take it off between takes."

"I went to my makeup people and said, 'What's going on here? Get to the drawing board!' Five days later, I had a removable head. I felt better about everything."

Building the Battlefield

Playing opposite Travolta's Terl, Barry Pepper (*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Green Mile*) seizes his first action lead in the role of true-blue Jonnie, local wildman-turned-galactic-conqueror. Other prominent characters include Chrissie, Jonnie's long-suffering girlfriend, played by Sabine Karsenti, and Terl's secretary, Chirk, portrayed by Travolta's wife, actress Kelly Preston.

Fans will be glad to hear that the basic premise of *Battlefield Earth* the film remains the same as that of the book. In fact, the filmmakers used the novel as a strict guideline. "I fed on the book, and every department had to read it," Christian said. "We had sections printed, and Ron Hubbard had actually written a detailed piece on making this book into a



The heroic Jonnie Goodboy Tyler (Barry Pepper) battles the evil Psychlos, Terl and Ker (Travolta and Forest Whitaker), without the benefit of a futuristic codpiece.



Battlefield Earth tells the heroic tale of one Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, the noble, pure-hearted star quarterback of one of the last remaining human villages on Earth in the year 3000. Jonnie's tired of watching his neighbors wither and die of mysterious causes, so he sets out into the world, ignoring fellow villagers' warnings of monsters and danger on the outside. He promptly discovers the ruins of the city of Denver just over the next rise, and is about to return to his village bearing an amazing invention—glass!—when he's captured by a big, ugly, alien monster. In a "car." (Actually, a battle tank.)

This particular monster, Terl, is a Psychlo, and he has got plans for Jonnie. A thousand years prior to the story, the Psychlos almost wiped out humanity on Earth with a vicious chemical weapons attack.

Unlike the rest of his evil alien kind, Terl suspects that these surviving "man-animals" might serve some purpose other than as beasts of burden or for the occasional target practice. Believing the humans have rudimentary smarts, Terl plans to train them to mine a hidden gold vein in the Rocky Mountains. As chief of security on this outpost world of the Psychlo mining empire, he can arrange for the excavation to go unnoticed. Then Terl plans to kill the humans and live out his days on Psychlo fabulously wealthy.

Of course, in classic pulp hero tradition, Jonnie proves quite the clever monkey, and learns to use Psychlo equipment, weaponry, and more. Once armed with knowledge, he proceeds to set in motion his own plan to free Earth and almost single-handedly build a future for mankind.

movie—what he thought the important aspects were. We fed off that daily."

However, the filmmakers did have to make one fairly significant change to translate the novel to the big screen: They cut it in half.

"When I first wanted to make it into a movie, we could not get a script that was viable," said Travolta. "It was hard enough to capture the qualities of the book in a screenplay, let alone all thousand-plus pages. We ultimately decided to tackle half of it. But we didn't really get it right until, oh, upwards of the tenth draft."

Christian credits screenwriter Cory Mandell with not only condensing the massive story but also translating the book's more "internal" qualities to film. "Cory very cleverly condensed what in the book is fascinating reading—when Terl captures Jonnie and puts him in the cage, and it's just the two of them for quite a few chapters, sizing each other up. Cory shifted this world so that the Psychlos already have humans working for them, and they capture Jonnie and these other two and bring them in. That kicks the movie into gear.

"It would have been fascinating to do it one-on-one, but that would have been more like a European art movie."

It's this willingness to break away from the novel's structure that makes the visual story more dramatic for moviegoers, Travolta says.

"If you're faithful to a novel, you capture the spirit. I really believe that, after doing many novels-turned-to-films over the last few years. A script adaptation of a novel is almost like an impressionist painting; you look at it to get enough of the illusion you need to see the picture. But

you've got to start with enough of a base to support that illusion. That's what I think happens when you capture a book. You have to get enough of the fun details that one can only get from reading



Earth Is the Machine Terl manipulates his secretary, Chirk (played by Mrs. Travolta, Kelly Preston), while his human slaves mine gold to fuel his evil scheme.

the book. That's what I felt this particular draft of the script did."

"The book was basically a jumping-off point," screenwriter Mandell agreed. "We wanted to stay true to the spirit and tone of the book, and to Terl and Jonnie, but find ways to dramatize it. The rules of the world are still there, but some of the story elements have changed that will hopefully make the movie accessible to people who never read the book—yet true enough to the book that fans will be happy, too."

The fans' reactions are very important to the filmmakers. "We had a big, big vocal fan of the book flow onto the set at one point," Christian recalled. "She watched two or three days of filming and she came to me afterward and said, 'You know, Jonnie, the ship, this whole atmosphere, is *exactly* as I imagined it.' That had been

the biggest challenge in pulling this off, for the money we had: being responsible to the book, the fans, Hubbard, all of that."

So, after more than twelve years in the planning stages, the script's new direction really got the project off the ground, Travolta recalls. "When the pages started coming in I said, 'Oh my god, he's getting it. He's really getting it.' I knew at that moment that I had a script that captured the book. There were no excuses. I had to get this going."

Christian recalls the film's long road to production and a distribution agreement with Warner Bros. "No studios would do it," he said.

In the end, plans came together in a neat synchronicity: By the time Travolta had the script just right, he found himself with a gap in his schedule and had gained

enough Hollywood star-power personally to bring much-needed financial backers to the table. "Even if we had gotten the script earlier, I don't know if I had the clout to

actually get it financed. So there was twofold timing: the script being in great shape and my position at the time."

Battlefield on a Budget

Things were equally in synch as Travolta began to assemble the rest of the film's creative team. First he approached Christian to direct. In addition to such directorial work as *Underworld* and *Nos-tradamus*, Christian came highly recommended by George Lucas for his work as set decorator on *Star Wars* and second-unit director on *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace*.

"Roger's a great visionary and one of the most collaborative people I've ever met," Travolta said. "George Lucas thought that Roger was really one of the main reasons the first *Star Wars* film happened. Willing to work hard, but willing to let you explore your contribution as well."

Christian introduced that collaborative feeling onto the set by bringing the cast together for read-throughs before the cameras started rolling. "We rehearsed a lot, which aided the survival of the scenes," Travolta said.

Mandell said this experience led to improvements in the script, as well. "It was a very interactive process, and we refined characters and rewrote scenes. I think it was really smart of Roger to involve the writer and actors in the beginning. One of the

great results of that is that, hopefully, the minor characters have a real richness and life to them."

While the film may have had rich characters, it was not blessed with a rich budget, Christian recalls. "Because of the fact it was independently financed, we had to do it for half of what the studios would put up. It was total déjà vu back to the days of making the first *Star Wars*, getting people to believe we could pull it off."

The budget-conscious team explored many cost-cutting opportunities during the shoot and post-production. "We looked at [digital effects] possibilities and actually went to the much more tried-and-true model shooting, which gave us a lot of production value," Christian said. "We also saved money filming in Montreal."

As set decorator for *Star Wars* and art director for *Alien*, Christian helped create the "worn-out future" of modern SF films—a look that ironically keeps those films in particular from appearing "dated." The director said fans will see similar techniques in *Battlefield Earth*.

"The 'organic reality' that exists in sci-fi literature never seems to ring true in cinema," he said. "Trying to make things look retro—kind of art-deco shiny design—works in novels; it just doesn't hold up on the screen."

But this film nevertheless has its own unique look and feel. "Everything we've done on *Battlefield Earth* is set on an Earth that's crumbling a thousand years in the future—Earth has basically stopped. But the Psychlos have their own technology, which Ron Hubbard worked out very carefully. I worked very closely with production designer Patrick Tatopoulos to give the alien craft and the planet Psychlo

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Silver Screen

something very different.”

What are some of the visual treats in store for fans? “Teleportation is the secret of the Psychlos’ power,” Christian said. “We’ve developed ‘teleportation technology,’ and I’ve

fices made by the entire crew to see the project through. “Roger, and Giles [Nuttgens, the cinematographer], and Patrick Tatopoulos, the designer . . . we’re talking about the upper-level guys here, and I’ve never seen people sacrifice like this to pull



Terl indulges in a tall glass of Kerbango, the beverage of choice in Psychlo mining colonies.

got Doc Bailey, who did that massive final shot in *Fight Club*. He’s created with us a teleportation sequence which is quite different. We didn’t want to be like *Star Trek* or *The Matrix*. We developed our own teleportation that looks organically real, but it’s ‘sci-fi.’

“The alien ships themselves, well, everything the Psychlos do is mining, to get ore, to get rich. So, in effect, we approached the Psychlo ships as if they were Mexican ore trucks—but these things can fly!”

Viewers will even get to see the Psychlos’ homeworld close up, Christian promises. “We see planet Psychlo for the first time when [one official] teleports back. We see the exterior of the planet, then we see this massive shot where we pan across the landscape into the industrial heart of their planet. Hubbard described it as ‘ten times as big as anything you can imagine on Earth.’ We are creating the purple hell of Psychlo.”

Travolta applauds the sacri-

this sucker off. They worked out of their own pockets for six months. Roger gave up other jobs. They did it because of their love for the book and wanting to make this work. I’d never experienced that before. That’s a rare thing.”

At the time of this interview, the labor of love continued as Christian and his team began post-production: designing sound, composing music, and creating two hundred-sixty effects shots in preparation for the film’s release. “Normally I would have at least six months for post-production, but we agreed to accelerate the process since we were offered a May twelfth slot,” he said. “We don’t get a lot of sleep.”

Church Chat

Of course, despite his reputation as one of the founding fathers of modern science fiction, it’s difficult to discuss L. Ron Hubbard’s work without talking about his most enduring legacy, the Church of Scientology. Hubbard

addressed the question himself in his author’s note. “Some of my readers may wonder that I did not include my own serious subjects in this book. It was with no thought of dismissal of them. It was just that I put on my professional writer’s hat. I also did not want to give anybody the idea I was doing a press relations job for my other serious works.”

Travolta has made no secret of his beliefs and has practiced Scientology for decades. The actor is philosophical about the ties between the church and *Battlefield Earth*, noting that people were bound to draw parallels.

“Fortunately, this was a very popular book in its own right,” he said. “I saw a reader’s poll that rated it the third most popular SF book of the century. The success of the book and Hubbard’s history as a science fiction writer should help take the place of the Scientology hype. You guys [the genre press] know about Hubbard the science fiction writer. Now I need to educate the mainstream press.”

Mandell said, “I had concerns when it was first offered to me, because L. Ron Hubbard wrote it and I’m not a Scientologist. I’m a Jew. And it’s not so much that I’m against it, it’s just that I would be uncomfortable adapting a book written by someone who founded any religion. Travolta assured me that in addition to founding the religion, L. Ron Hubbard also wrote a lot of science fiction. There’s nothing religious about the book, it’s completely secular. There’s nothing sacred about the philosophy in it. There’s a lot of ‘Hero’s Journey’ and classic storytelling and really fun elements.”

Neither does Christian see *Battlefield Earth* as “a

Scientology film.”

“This is purely a science fiction fable,” he said. “There are no underground messages, no pressure on anybody—nothing to do with that side of Hubbard at all.”

Travolta agreed. “It’s classic science fiction,” he said. “I thought I was going to be the only one with this level of enthusiasm, but it was Forest Whitaker’s favorite book in college. And Barry Pepper brought this extraordinary energy to Jonnie. All around me I saw enthusiasm that mirrored mine. It was a wonderful surprise.”

Readers also have demonstrated enthusiasm for this story—for nearly twenty years. Upon its publication, *Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000* jumped onto the bestseller lists, and it stayed there for eight months. In fact, the book made the *New York Times* bestseller list in both hardcover and paperback. SF fan polls consistently rank the book with classics like *Dune* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

But will this literary success translate into box office success in a mainstream world used to thinking of Hubbard as a religious leader first and a writer second? Christian feels confident that it will. “Once this world is exposed to an audience, they’ll soon realize, ‘Oh, this is a great ride.’” ▲

About the Author

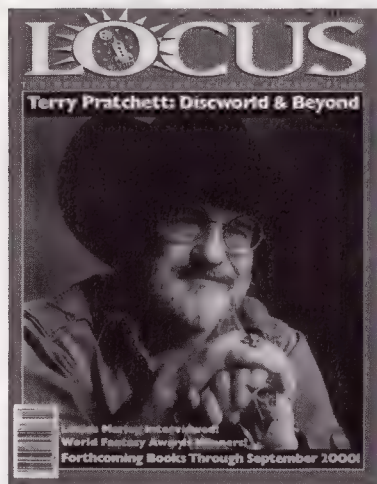


Cory Herndon, author of *The Official MAGIC: THE GATHERING® Starter Guide and an editor of TOPDECK™ magazine*, is a frequent contributor of game and film columns to *AMAZING Stories*. If you need him, look first in the radioactive hills of Colorado, awaiting a long-overdue gas drone attack.

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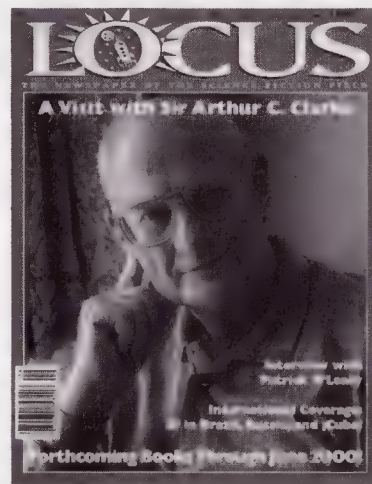
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Roleplaying in Battlefield Earth

*Play the Psychlos,
or play against them*

IT IS THE YEAR 3000. Earth is under the dominion of the Psychlos, a mighty alien species that conquered the planet a millennium ago. From their domed mining installations, these representatives of a far-flung interstellar empire intently work toward grinding out every last bit of mineral resource the planet has to offer. Humanity is on the brink of extinction, having never recovered from its civilization being reduced to smoldering ruins by the Psychlo war machines.

Now, one man, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, throws off the weight of centuries of barbarism and apathetic superstition and leaves behind his community to search for a better life and future. Challenging the legends about monsters sent to punish humankind, he boldly leaves the safety of the mountains, unaware that he is riding into the clutches of something more evil than any legend ever told.

Becoming unwittingly trapped in a web of treachery and greed spun by Terl, the Psychlo Security Chief of Earth, Jonnie must overcome his ignorance of the world and the universe and find a way to rekindle the spirit of survival in humankind—before Terl manages to execute a plan that will mean the final destruction of humanity.

Earth in A.D. 3000

The planet Earth has reverted to a simpler state than the one we know today. The state of the natural world is as it was some ten to fifteen thousand years prior. The planet has recovered swiftly from the abuses of humankind and the horrors the invading Psychlos heaped upon it a thousand years ago—except, of course, for the fact that the Psychlo mining operations have sapped humanity's home of an enormous amount of its mineral resources.

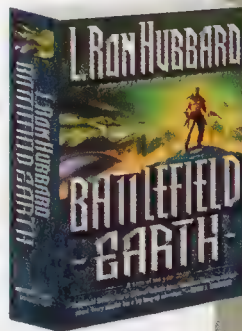
Mother Nature has all but reclaimed the mighty human cities. Most single-family dwellings have been covered by drifting earth and vegetation—with suburbs and small towns appearing now as extensive ranges of oddly shaped hills. The cities—Denver, Columbus, and Dallas, among others—still reach toward the sky, although the sharp lines of their once-glittering steel and glass towers have been softened by centuries of weather and vegetation.

Humankind suffered near extinction at

the hands of the Psychlos, a species that demands nothing short of complete domination of any world it invades. The scant few remnants of humanity are an endangered species. They huddle in primitive villages located in isolated areas where Mother Earth has provided an environment in which humanity can exist but which is extremely dangerous for the Psychlos. Still, with each passing generation, the light of civilization grows dimmer for humanity at large.

Unbeknownst to them, the survivors among the human species are standing at a threshold. They must start to reclaim that which was once theirs, or they will fade away completely over the next few generations.

Only in the areas around the domed Psycho mining installations does Earth display the open wounds of civilization anymore; the waste and vented gases from the Psychlo bases turn the areas around their settlements into wastelands devoid of life.



About This Article

Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000 is one of science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard's most acclaimed works. It is a tale of high drama, tragedy, humor, and the indestructible ability of the human species to forever dream of a brighter and better tomorrow. It is a sweeping adventure epic in the tradition of the greatest of classics, with a questing hero pitted against insurmountable odds. Put a different way, it's a great foundation upon which to build adventures for the ALTERNITY® Science Fiction Role-playing Game.

This article is intended for roleplaying gamers who are interested in creating adventures within the setting of the novel *Battlefield Earth*, using the ALTERNITY rules.

What Is a Roleplaying Game?

A roleplaying game is best described as an interactive storytelling experience. Most players of the game assume the roles of the main characters in a story, and the actions they choose for their characters to take then determine the direction of the plot.

A single player, called the Gamemaster, serves as part co-author by determining the actions of all the minor characters in the story, and part director or referee by describing the setting for all the other players while resolving disputes or the outcomes of actions on the part of characters controlled by players.

The rules are there so everyone has a common frame of reference to determine how good the character they are playing is at doing something, and for giving the Gamemaster a position from which he or she can make decisions about how the player characters interact with the game world and the rest of its population.

One of the most important aspects of a role-playing game, however, is for everyone to have fun while they spin a tale of action and adventure through their characters. All players should be encouraged to be involved and be creative as the tale unfolds.

The Psychlos

The Psychlos are a race of merciless conquerors who have used technological might to spread their domination to the most far-flung corners of the universe. They control an intergalactic empire consisting of so many thousands of star systems that some speculate that even the Psychlo Imperial Bureaucracy may have lost track of some of them.

Description: The Psychlos are, by human standards, giants of terrifying appearance—bipedal beings who stand

Battlefield Earth as an ALTERNITY Setting

The ALTERNITY game is designed to run science fiction adventures featuring characters as primitive as cavemen, or so advanced that their technology is almost the same as magic. Its rules can accommodate anything the Gamemaster and players can dream up, with their imagination being the only limitation. However, as mentioned above, the ALTERNITY roleplaying game does have rules—presented in the *ALTERNITY Fast-Play Rules* or the *ALTERNITY Adventure Game* for beginning players, or in the *ALTERNITY Player's Handbook* and *ALTERNITY Gamemaster Guide*, two books for experienced gamers.

The *Adventure Game* and the two books are available at hobby stores and bookstores everywhere. The *Fast-Play Rules* are offered as a free download at www.wizards.com/alternity. In addition, a version of the *Fast-Play Rules* was printed in issue 599 of *AMAZING Stories*.

These products provide a range of basic information that applies to any setting, while this article provides specific information helpful in creating new *Battlefield Earth* adventures, such as defining the menacing Psychlos and their technology in game terms and providing game statistics for the novel's most important characters.

What's contained on the following pages is by no means the last word on what a *Battlefield Earth* roleplaying game adventure might be like. All that is provided here are the bare bones—a starting point for the creativity of Gamemasters and their players. The novel itself, the forthcoming movie based on it (see "Silver Screen" in this issue), and the decalogy *Mission: Earth*, which serves as a sequel to the book, all provide more fodder for the imagination.

an imposing 3 meters tall, on average. They have broad torsos and heavily muscled limbs, possessing the strength to tear a human in half with but a swipe of a single taloned paw. The massive strength of the Psychlos stems from the fact that their native world is a place of very heavy gravity.

Their faces are roughly humanlike in appearance, but feature heavy, gnarled bone structures around the eyes and mouth. These bones move with the Psychlos' face muscles, giving their faces as wide a range of expres-

sion as those of human beings. Their eyes are set deep within their faces, amber orbs that universally seem to glow with menace.

Habitat/Society: Few beings native to worlds with oxygen/nitrogen atmospheres such as Earth ever confront the full terror of a Psychlo's face, since that type of atmosphere is deadly to Psychlos. They breathe a highly potent gas—which is as deadly to human beings as Earth's atmosphere is to Psychlos. The gas is impossible to create off the Psychlo homeworld, so they must import it to subject worlds and rely on atmosphere recycling facilities to keep their settlements habitable. When venturing outside on most alien worlds, Psychlos must travel with tanks of "breathe-gas" and

wear breathe-masks. This gas is explosively reactive with uranium, making this radioactive substance

A sweeping adventure epic, *Battlefield Earth* is a great foundation upon which to build adventures for the ALTERNITY® Science Fiction Roleplaying Game.

one of the few dangers that the Psychlos' physical and technological might cannot defeat.

The Psychlo culture is filled with subterfuge, treachery, and intimidation. "Survival of the fittest" is more than just a saying to them, it's a governing principle. Despite the species' highly advanced technology, Psychlo society still exhibits a number of traits that are more often found in feudal societies; transcending social barriers is very difficult, but not impossible, for the Psychlo people. Warriors and workers struggle to please the middle managers and low-ranking officers; those officers and managers are engaged in constant battles of one-upmanship in order to gain the attention of their superiors; high-ranking officers and upper-level managers are embroiled in convoluted plots to help them retain their positions and gain favor in the Imperial Court on the homeworld.

Despite this seemingly chaotic society, the Psychlos are united in their firm belief that they are superior to all other lifeforms in the universe. This belief is reinforced and confirmed to them by the fact that their

invincible military equipment and superior technology makes them the absolute masters of their conquered planets and of subject populations that survive Psychlo dominance.

Consumers and exploiters, the Psychlos see a planet like Earth as nothing more than raw materials, its inhabitants a mere nuisance to be exterminated without a second thought. Virtually no efforts are ever made to assimilate alien beings into Psychlo society; only their technology and ideas might *occasionally* be of use.

One of the most important institutions in the Psychlo Empire is the Intergalactic Mining Company. Employing billions of Psychlos from all walks of life, the company exists to set up massive mining installations on captured planets, to bore out of them their precious metals and rare minerals. The mining products are teleported back to

the planet Psychlo to sate the insatiable hunger of the core world.

Ravenous to acquire precious metals to feed their technologically dominated culture and voracious military machine, the Psychlos are forever searching the galaxies—and even other universes, according to some rumors—for new sources of minerals. Whether a world is inhabited by another sentient species matters not to the Psychlos. If the native species is deemed to be of some value to the empire, it is offered a chance to submit. If the species is deemed too primitive to be worth the trouble of establishing diplomatic contact, the Psychlos exterminate it as one would any infestation of pests, launching drones that destroy the species with poison gases and devastating weaponry. They have yet to encounter another species that can withstand their mighty fleets and ground troops.

Sample Psychlo Characters

The following Psychlos are drawn from L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000*.



Terl yearns to return to the comforting dark purple hues of his home planet of Psychlo.

TERL: Security Chief

Level 12 Combat Spec

STR 15	(+3)	INT 10	(0)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 13	(+2)
CON 12		PER 10	

Action Check Score

Marginal 14+ Ordinary 13 Good 6 Amazing 3
Actions per Round: 3
Durability: Stun 12 Wound 12 Mortal 6

Weapons

Unarmed (brawl) d4+5w/d4+7w/d4+4m
Personal blaster d6w/d6+2w/d4+1m
Range (S/M/L): 20/50/150 Type: En

Armor

Natural body d6+1 (LI), d6 (HI), d6 (EN)

Skills

Athletics [15]—throw [16]; Unarmed Attack [15]—brawl [17]; Manipulation [10]—lockpick [11], prestidigitation [11]; Modern Ranged Weapons [10]—pistol [12]; Stealth [10]—shadow [11], sneak [12]; Vehicle Operation [10]—air [12], land [12]; Business [10]—illicit [12]; Security [10]—protection protocols [13], security devices [12]; Administration [13]; Awareness [13]—intuition [14], perception [15]; Investigate [13]—interrogate [14], search [14]; Resolve [13]—mental [14]; Deception [10]—bluff [12]; Interaction [10]—bargain [12], intimidate [12].

Second only in authority to the general managers of the Intergalactic Mining Company's operations on Earth, Terl nonetheless knows his career is heading

toward permanent obscurity. Earth is the very definition of an insignificant, backwater planet, so even though Terl has spent years striving to be viewed as an important individual in the Psychlo Empire, he has become trapped in a dead-end job.

Terl chafes under the bonds of his assignment on Earth. He hates the poisonous atmosphere and is sick of the green hills and blue skies. He yearns to return to the comforting dark purple hues of his home planet of Psychlo. He finally becomes fed up and decides to devote his significant talents to escaping not only his current situation but the entire downward spiral of his career.

Using blackmail and other threats to lay the groundwork within his mine site base, Terl sets in motion an elaborate plan to rescue himself from the

wretched Earth and seize an illicit fortune. He embarks on a hunt to capture some of the remnant "man-animals" still straggling in a few, uranium-rich areas of the almost depopulated planet. As his trained pets and slaves, they will do his work for him. And then the last of them will be destroyed, as Terl retires to his reward.

His first captive is Jonnie Goodboy Tyler. Terl initially considers his slave a stupid animal who is capable of little more than performing tricks, but as time goes by, he realizes that by educating the creature in Psychlo ways, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler becomes even more useful. Terl also recognizes that his slave is plotting to destroy him, so even as Jonnie plots fiercely to escape, he is only playing into Terl's mighty taloned claws.

Personality: Like all of his species, the concepts of mercy and pity are completely alien to Terl. To Terl's mindset, there are two kinds of beings in the universe: those you control and those you don't. Those you control are to be manipulated for your benefit, or killed just for the fun of it. Those you don't control are to be killed for your safety, if some method can't be found to bring them under control. As such, Terl is always on the lookout for

"leverage" to bend and twist others to his will—and if no leverage can be found, he creates it through clever manipulation and fabricated "truths." He is a master strategist who misses no detail.

Like all Psychlos, he believes that the resources of the universe are there for the sole use of his species, but he is cunning enough to realize that resources should never be wasted. He also believes that things that other Psychlos consider worthless—such as the remnants of humanity—might be valuable in the hands of someone with vision . . . someone like Terl. However, he may learn that to underestimate the strength of the human spirit could be a fatal mistake, even for a Psychlo.

The Personal Blaster: Awkward and bulky by human standards, and difficult for non-Psychlos to hold and fire, these laser pistols are standard issue to all security personnel and soldiers at Psychlo mining installations. A heavily guarded armory containing dozens more is also found at each installation, so they can be issued to executives or loyal company employees in the case of threats to the installation or rebellion among the workers.

NUMPH: Planetary Director of Earth

Level 9 Diplomat

STR 11	(+1)	INT 15	(+3)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 14	(+2)
CON 10		PER 10	

Action Check Score

Marginal 14+ Ordinary 13 Good 6 Amazing 3
Actions per Round: 3
Durability: Stun 10 Wound 10 Mortal 5

Weapons

Unarmed d4+3w/d4+5w/d4+2m
Personal blaster d6w/d6+2w/d4+1m
Range (S/M/L): 20/50/150 Type: En

Armor

Natural body d6+1 (LI), d6 (HI), d6 (EN)

Skills

Unarmed Attack [11]; Manipulation [10]—prestidigitation [11]; Modern Ranged Weapons [10]; Vehicle Operation [10]; Business [15]—illicit [19]; Law [15]; System Operation [15]; Administration [14]—bureaucracy [17]; Resolve [14]; Culture [10]—etiquette (Psychlo) [15]; Deception [10]—bluff [14], bribe [15]; Interaction [10]—bargain [15], charm [12]; Leadership [14]—command [16].

Numph has spent his career rising quietly through the ranks of the Mining Company, relying on his ability to bribe or

smooth-talk the right individuals to gain promotions rather than on any exceptional degree of skill. Many Psychlos would be distraught to have put in the years of service and bribery that Numph has, only to find themselves posted in a dead-end assignment on Earth. Yes, Numph may well be the manager in charge of all Company operations on Earth, but where is the glory in that? No one posted to Earth will ever amount to anything . . . unless they can find a way to get off Earth.

Personality: Numph, however, seems strangely happy on Earth. Rumor has it that he even requested to be posted here. His easygoing manner disturbs Terl greatly, because the Psychlo security chief desperately wants to find a way to bring Numph under his thumb; Numph is the only person who might threaten Terl's dreams of wealth and power. Terl *knows* Numph is up to *something*, but is the soft, corrupt manager going to outsmart the cunning security officer?

Psychlo Technology

The following items are among those most commonly used by the Psychlos featured in the novel *Battlefield Earth*.

Armored Groundcar

Performance Characteristics:

Acceleration: 45 meters/phase/phase
Cruising Speed: 140 kph (80 kph rough)
Maximum Speed: 280 kph (120 kph rough)
Durability: 20/20/10
Armor: d4+1 (LI), d4+1 (HI), d4+1 (En)
Weapon: Blast cannon. Range: 50/100/400, d6+1s/d6+1w/d6+3w, type HI.

Every Psychlo mining installation is issued a number of groundcars, each of which has a specific purpose. The armored groundcar is intended for use by security forces and soldiers when they are entering what may be a threatening situation. They are the fastest and most heavily defended of the Psychlo ground vehicles, virtually impervious to all human weapons.

The armored groundcar can carry up to four Psychlos, in comfortable bucket seats that are so large they make any human passengers feel like babies. The two front seats are for the driver and the gunner.

The groundcar features a sealed cabin that permits Psychlo passengers and operators to use the vehicle without necessarily needing to use breathe-masks; most, however, keep them on hand, in addition to the six emergency breathe-masks that are contained under the seats of the vehicle. The cabin contains 12 hours worth of breathe-gas, while each emergency mask is attached to a tank containing 5 hours of gas.

Each of the groundcar's wheels is driven by its own power plant, giving the vehicle excellent acceleration and maneuverability. The power plants are sealed, allowing the groundcar to travel through up to 2.5 meters of water without risk of shorting them. A powerful winch (capable of lifting up to 1,000 kg) and a cutting tool (capable of cutting through several feet of concrete or hardened steel) are mounted on an arm that can be controlled either by the driver or the gunner. The armored groundcar is further equipped with a swivel-mounted blast cannon. Controlled through an instrument panel by the gunner, it can fire lethal energy blasts or be set to fire stun charges. The stun charges tend to inflict only one-quarter of their damage in wounds to human targets, since the blast cannon is really intended for use on buildings, other vehicles, and large beasts. The groundcar is equipped with a communications array that has a range of up to 2,000 kilometers.

Breathe-Mask

Breathe-masks are personal equipment that allows Psychlos to survive outside the domes containing the atmosphere of their homeworld, or, alternatively, allows non-Psychlos to enter the domes without needing to breathe the Psychlo atmosphere—which is poisonous to most other sentient species.

A breathe-mask consists of two main components. First, a helmet encases the wearer's head,

allowing him to look out through a pair of tinted, curved lenses. The helmet and lenses are both damage-resistant, able to absorb 20 points of damage apiece before cracking. A connector tube, wrapped in a protective rubber coating, is attached to the front of the mask and connected to the second main component, the breathe-gas canister.

The canister contains up to 5 hours of breathe-gas, with an additional hour of emergency gas that is automatically recycled by filters in the breathe-mask as the wearer exhales. (After the hour is up, the wearer must roll under his or her Constitution on a d20 every minute. If the roll fails, the wearer falls unconscious. Death from asphyxiation follows.) The canister is strapped to the wearer's back or outer thigh, or carried over the shoulder on a strap.

A breathe-gas canister can be filled with any type of atmosphere, but the recycling system on the mask only works for the Psychlo breathe-gas.

Learning Machine

A wonder of Psychlo technology, this device interacts with the user's brain waves to transmit knowledge directly into his or her mind, permitting a

Numph is the only person who might threaten Terl's dreams of wealth and power.





A strapping and keen-minded youth, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler stands out among his people.

character to absorb in a matter of minutes what would take months or years to learn through conventional means. The user gets to set the speed at which the knowledge is absorbed.

To use a learning machine, the user must insert a lesson disk into it. A beam of light then emanates from the machine. The user must allow the light to intersect his or her brainpan, at which point the knowledge is beamed directly into long-term memory.

In game terms, a user can gain the equivalent of 2 skill points per hour of being linked with the machine. These skill points must be applied toward acquiring a certain broad skill or acquiring or improving a certain specialty skill that is specified before use of the machine begins. (Each learning disk contains recorded knowledge relating to a specific field of study or group of technical skills.)

In the novel, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler used the learning machine (with Teri's consent) numerous times over a period of several weeks. In a roleplaying situation, however, the Gamemaster should limit access to the machine, not permitting any character to use it more than once or twice. (This can be accomplished by declaring that the machine will fail to function for anyone who has already used

it the maximum allowable number of times.)

Kerbango

Kerbango is a much-loved and often-consumed beverage in the Psychlo mining colonies. It affects Psychlos much the same way that alcohol affects humans. For each bottle of Kerbango consumed, a Psychlo must roll under his or her Constitution on a d20. With each roll failed, a +1 step modifier is applied to all Dexterity-, Intelligence-, Will- and Personality-based skill checks while a -1 step modifier is applied to all Strength-based skill checks.

Even if a Psychlo manages to fight off the effects of Kerbango on his skills, it is still evident to those around him or her that he or she is

under the influence: The Psychlo's orange eyes become bloodshot.

The Remnants of Humanity

By and large, the human species was wiped from the Earth during the Psychlo invasion, a thousand years prior to the time of *Battlefield Earth*. Humanity had no chance against the technologically superior Psychlos. In fact, few of Earth's nuclear and other weapons were even fired, because the invaders blanketed most centers of human activity with deadly biological warfare agents. Within days, the "war" was over, and within decades, the Intergalactic Mining Company had taken possession of the planet and set about draining its mineral riches like a parasite drawing blood.

Ironically, it was humanity's desire for knowledge that led to its downfall. The Psychlos learned of Earth when they encountered a primitive deep-space probe made with alloys that were rare in their far-flung empire. Since the probe even contained directions on how to locate its world of origin, the Psychlos mobilized a portion of their space fleet and set forth to add this new world to their holdings. The indigenous sentients were deemed too primitive to be of use to the Psychlos, so they were treated accordingly.

Description: Humanity has changed little in the past thousand years. Life expectancy has shortened to a maximum of sixty or so years and few people grow taller than 2 meters in height. But, otherwise, humanity resembles that which we have recognized as such for thousands of years.

Habitat/Society: As has always been the case, human society takes many forms on Earth in the year 3000. One certainty is that most of humanity has lost all but the most basic vestiges of civilization and technology, existing mostly in primitive tribal societies. The species now lives on in isolated pockets, clinging to survival either in areas too remote from the Psychlo mining installations to be worthy of notice, or in areas that are rich in uranium, the radioactive mineral that reacts explosively with Psychlo breathe-gas.

A typical human settlement is that from which Jonnie Goodboy Tyler hailed. Located in the towering range that was once known as the Rocky Mountains, it is a tiny village governed by a council of elders. Rituals such as marriages and funerals still exist, but have become almost childlike parodies of what they once represented. With each passing generation, more hard knowledge is replaced by superstition, fewer children are born, more livestock dies off, and the crops get poorer. All the while, the people grow more and more superstitious and more afraid of the land beyond their little village, convinced that it is teeming with monsters of the kind that descended from the heavens to destroy all life a thousand years ago. Within three or four generations, the community will no longer be viable.

Another typical community can be found in the Scottish highlands. Here, the people have not fallen as far as those from Jonnie's village, but they have instead turned to a warlike society of several communities that survive by raiding one another and stealing property—even other villagers. Led by the strongest and most cunning warrior in the community, these remains of humanity are just as likely to become extinct within a few generations as those in Jonnie's home village, succumbing to self-destructiveness

instead of apathy.

Virtually every existing community believes they are the last survivors of humanity, and none feel inclined to search beyond the horizon or seem even capable of conceiving of the fact that there might be human survivors elsewhere—so violent was the shock given by the Psychlo attack to the collective ego of humanity.

Sample Human Characters

The following humans are drawn from L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000*.

JONNIE GOODBOY TYLER: Visionary Dreamer

Level 5 Free Agent

STR 13	(+2)	INT 9	(0)
DEX 9	(0)	WIL 12	(+1)
CON 12		PER 10	

Action Check Score

Marginal 12+ Ordinary 11 Good 5 Amazing 2
Actions per Round: 3
Durability: Stun 12 Wound 12 Mortal 6

Weapons

Unarmed	d4+2s/d4+3s/d4+4s
Kill-club (bludgeon)	d4+3s/d4+3w/d4+4w
Kill-club (ranged)	d4+1s/d4+1w/d4+2w
Range (S/M/L): 2/5/10	Type: LI
Sling (ranged)	d4s/d4+2s/d4w
Range (S/M/L): 10/20/60	Type: LI

Armor

None

Skills

Athletics [13]—climb [14], jump [15], throw [14]; Melee Weapons [13]—bludgeon [14]; Unarmed Attack [13]; Acrobatics [9]; Primitive Ranged Weapons [9]—kill-club [13]; Stealth [9]—sneak [10]; Stamina [12]; Survival [12]; Animal Handling [12]—animal riding [14]; Awareness [12]; Investigate [12]—track [13]; Resolve [12]; Deception [10]—bluff [11]; Interaction [10]—bargain [11].

Skills after Exposure to the Learning Machine

Athletics [13]—climb [14], jump [15], throw [14]; Melee Weapons [13]—bludgeon [14]; Unarmed Attack [13]; Acrobatics [9]; Manipulation [9]—lockpick [11]; Primitive Ranged Weapons [9]—kill-club [13]; Stealth [9]—sneak [10]; Vehicle Operation [9]; Stamina [12]; Survival [12]; Knowledge [9]—first aid [10]; Life Science [9]; Navigation [9]; Medical Science [9]; Physical Science [9]; System Operation [9]; Technical Science [9]; Animal Handling [12]—animal riding [14]; Awareness [12]; Investigate [12]—track [13]; Resolve [12]; Culture [10]—etiquette (Psychlo) [11]; Deception [10]—bluff [11]; Interaction [10]—bargain [11]; Leadership [11].

A strapping and keen-minded youth, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler stands out among his people. At the age of twenty, he is half a head taller than the average villager, nearly 2 meters tall and shining with the bronzed health of his outdoor existence. He has light brown hair and beard and ice-blue eyes.

Fed up with watching his people succumb to hardship and disease, Jonnie decides to violate long-standing taboos about leaving the village. Since childhood, he has wondered why the villagers didn't live on the verdant plains that were visible from the barren peaks that surround his community. Now, he determines to ignore the legends about the monsters said to have been sent by the gods to punish humankind, and strikes out on his own to discover what lies beyond the confines of the valley and to find a healthier place for his people to live.

On the plains below his mountain home, Jonnie and his horse, Wind-splitter, encounter the myths come to life: evil beyond all legend, and truths beyond imagining.

Captured by Terl, Jonnie soon learns that the fate of humankind is certain extinction unless he can find a way to fight the unstoppable. When Terl starts to train the "man-animal" in the ways of the Psychlos, Jonnie becomes determined to overcome his ignorance of the world and the universe. He strives to learn all he can from the Psychlo overlords and their "learning machine," intending all along to turn that knowledge against them.

Personality: Jonnie has always been filled with a desire to explore and to find the answers to every question. He has never been satisfied with accepting the philosophy of hopelessness that the rest of his community has embraced. Once he discovers that the Psychlos were the ones responsible for the destruction of human civilization, he devotes his life to defeating

them. While he looks for ways to overcome the insurmountable odds, thoughts of Chrissie, the girl he left behind in his home village, remain in the back of his mind. He knows that he cannot fail in his bid to overthrow Psychlo domination, for if he does, the pitiful remains of humankind, including his beloved Chrissie, will die with him.

The Kill-Club: This weapon is a heavily weighted club attached to a long leather strap. It is used by Jonnie Goodboy Tyler's people as both a weapon and a hunting tool. It is used as a standard club in melee combat, but it can also be flung at an enemy and swiftly retrieved by means of the leather strap.

CHRISSIE: Headstrong Romantic

Level 2 Free Agent

STR 10	(0)	INT 9	(0)
DEX 11	(+1)	WIL 11	(+1)
CON 9		PER 10	

Action Check Score

Marginal 13+ Ordinary 12 Good 6 Amazing 3
Actions per Round: 2
Durability: Stun 9 Wound 9 Mortal 5

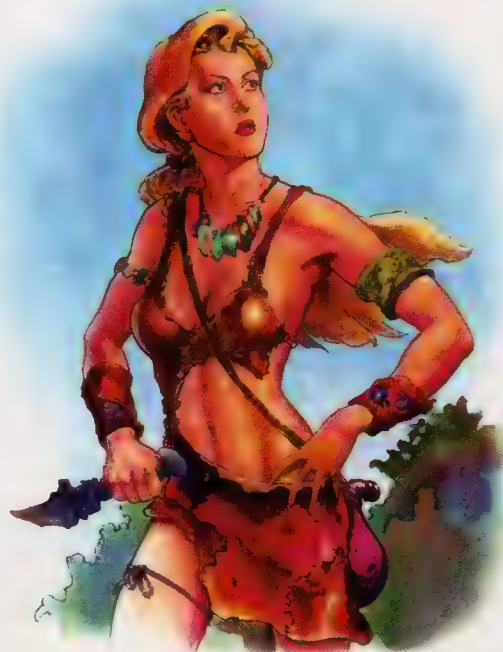
Weapons

Unarmed	d4s/d4+1s/d4+2s
---------	-----------------

Armor

None

Like Jonnie, Chrissie is a dreamer who tries to do her part to help improve the situation of her community.





Robert the Fox is one of the only humans besides Jonnie who has seen a Psychlo and escaped to tell about it.

Skills

Athletics [10]; Unarmed Attack [10]; Stealth [11]—hide [13]; Stamina [9]; Survival [9]; Knowledge [9]—first aid [12]; Animal Handling [11]; Awareness [11]—perception [14]; Resolve [11]; Interaction [10].

Chrissie lives in the mountain village with Jonnie and the handful of inhabitants who remain among the crumbling huts. She is a slight girl, eighteen years old and very pretty. She has large black eyes that seem in strange contrast to her corn-colored hair. Like other citizens of the community, she dresses in skins.

Chrissie's good looks and strong, healthy body lead every man in her village to desire her. Her kind heart and natural affinity for both children and animals make her an even more desirable mate. However, the independent-minded young woman loves Jonnie, and there is no one else for her as far as she is concerned—no matter what the others in the village say about his rebellious ways.

Reluctantly accepting Jonnie's decision to go on his search alone, Chrissie nonetheless pledges that she will come after him herself if he does not return to the village within one year. Legendary monsters or no, Chrissie's inner strength

and her devotion to Jonnie make her capable of any act of bravery. She will remain true to her promise and go in search of him if he does not return within a year. But will she fall victim to Terl's power-plays as Jonnie did?

Personality: Like Jonnie, Chrissie is a dreamer who tries to do her part to help improve the situation of her community. Unlike Jonnie, however, Chrissie is a little more hesitant to disobey her elders and flaunt tradition. However, the love she feels for Jonnie and the longing she feels during his absence are enough to make her deny everything her community holds dear if she must. She might try to

convince others to follow her in search of Jonnie, but if she fails, she will go alone. Chrissie is headstrong, and once she's made up her mind, no one can change it.

ROBERT THE FOX: Scottish Highlander

Level 8 Combat Spec

STR 11	(+1)	INT 10	(0)
DEX 10	(0)	WIL 10	(0)
CON 11		PER 13	

Action Check Score

Marginal 14+ Ordinary 13 Good 6 Amazing 3

Actions per Round: 2

Durability: Stun 11 Wound 11 Mortal 6

Weapons

Unarmed	d4+1s/d4+2s/d4+3s
Spear	d4+1w/d4+3w/d4+1m
Short sword	d4+1w/d6+1w/d6+2w

Armor

None

Skills

Athletics [11]—climb [12], jump [12]; Melee Weapons [11]—blade [13], bludgeon [12]; Unarmed Attack [11]; Primitive Ranged Weapons [10]—bow [12]; Stealth [10]—hide [11]; Movement [11]—swim [12], trailblazing [12]; Stamina [11]—endurance [13]; Survival [11]; Knowledge [10]—first aid [12]; Tactics [10]—infantry [12]; Awareness [10]; Resolve [10]; Culture [13]—etiquette (Scottish) [14], etiquette (Nordic) [14],

etiquette (English) [14]; Deception [13]; Interaction [13]—intimidate [14]; Leadership [13]—command [15], inspire [14].

Robert the Fox is an elder veteran of many raids and one of the only humans besides Jonnie who has seen a Psychlo and escaped to tell about it. His auburn hair is starting to go gray, and his eyes burn with a furious love of combat. To the Scottish, Robert the Fox is a respected strategist, a wise and brave warrior in the best Scottish tradition. To Jonnie, he becomes a much-needed and highly skilled ally.

Robert is "recruited" along with forty-nine other warriors as part of Terl's scheme to use "man-animals" to enrich himself. Robert and Jonnie forge a bond of friendship and determination while they and the hardy Highlanders struggle through a spectacular and dangerous mining project high on a cliff in the Rocky Mountains. Where before Jonnie only had hope, with Robert he now has access to genuine military experience and leadership. Together, the two men formulate a bold assault on Psychlo dominance over the Earth.

Personality: Robert is a born commander, intelligent, detail-oriented, and cool-headed, yet possessed of great courage and keen warrior instincts. 🐾



about the author

Steve Miller is a writer and game designer who lives in Renton, Washington. He has written material for a wide range of settings, among these being the *STAR WARS*® universe, the *DRAGONLANCE*® setting, the *RAVENLOFT*® setting, and the *World of Darkness*. This is his first contribution to *AMAZING Stories*.



about the illustrator

Painter, sculptor, and *Marvel* comic artist, Geof Isherwood has also done concept illustrations for movies, including *Battlefield Earth* and *Pluto Nash*. His first fully-illustrated solo comic, *Lincoln-16*, was released in 1997. He and Anne Tolson are collaborating on a mystic adventure novel for kids, *The Legend of Tarrow Tell*, due to hit book stores this year. He can be reached at www.skarwood.com.

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Reality Slough

Poke too many holes in the fabric of the universe, and this is what you get.

BY KENT ROBINSON

UNDERSTANDABLY, the fourth wormhole unit to successfully bellywhop—as such travel came to be known vernacularly—to its destination was surprised, to the last of its ten members, to discover Magellan living *in* the Large Magellanic Cloud.

That's right, Magellan. As in Ferdinand, the Portuguese navigator. Commander of the first expedition to sail around the Earth. Also an embezzler, but nobody's perfect. History had pretty much assumed he was dead, killed by Philippine natives in 1521.

The bearded explorer, something less than corporeal these days, wasn't alone in the cloud. There, too, were a wispy Hitler, a foggy Tiberius Catus Asconius Silius Italicus, a fuzzy André-Louis Debierne, a murky Maximilian Harden, a nebulous Austin Clarke, a hazy Pius IX, one cumuliform Mary of Guise, a squally Minnie Hauk, a gauzy Ewuare the Great, an unsubstantial Sambucuccio d'Alando, a gossamery Andrew Johnson,

an illusory Marie Sallé, several vaporous Carthusian monks, an immaterial materials handler, an intangible tangential motion expert originally from Tangier, an impalpable Kuo Hsi and even more impalpable Kuo Hsiang, a gaseous flatulence researcher, and lots of other folks for whom posterity had been kind, cruel, or indifferent.

"The ship is haunted," declared Baldemar Eisenbein, its navigator.

"Not so fast," cautioned Anastazja Klimek, its biologist.

"SO WHAT you're saying," summed up Lovisa Lundquist, *Rummager* captain, "is that these—these—these—"

"Things," offered Eisenbein.

"These *things* we've been seeing since venting the wormhole, while appearing to be ghosts or at the very least ghostlike, are nevertheless *not* ghosts."

ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA KUNZ

"Correct," Klimek crowed. "I've isolated sporoidal readings, as well as incidents of karyomitotic and anaphasic activity, not to mention considerable cytokinetic functioning."

"Not," said the bearded navigator, "if I understand such gobbledygook, qualities traditionally associated with ghosts, even I must admit."

"Besides," Klimek pointed out, "there are no such things as ghosts."

"Says you," said Eisenbein, piqued.

"Why so touchy?" queried the captain, her skin-tight blue bodywrap shimmering as she turned toward him.

"Baldy saw an old girlfriend drift through Corridor C a few hours ago," Klimek answered on his behalf. "For some irrational reason I fail to grasp—but then, mental matters are Rouch's department, not mine—Baldy's more comfortable believing his former flame is a dead-and-gone ghost, a disembodied spirit, a wandering blob of exanimate protoplasm, rather than a still-breathing biological being."

Captain Lundquist cocked a Swedish eyebrow at Bo Rouch, ship's shrink, in effect affording him the floor.

"We're not insane, so far as I can tell," asserted Rouch, drumming his fingers on the transparent megapolymer tabletop. "At worst, the entire crew is experiencing some kind of mass hallucination. But Anastazja's life readings would seem to invalidate even that supposition."

"What's done is done," snapped Eisenbein. "Carly drowned near the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Her dive oyster was defective; got crushed by too many pounds per square what-have-you. I refuse to live in the past."

"So far down," footnoted Klimek, "her body was, of course, never recovered."

An extremely faint Napoleon drifted through the conference chamber up near the ceiling, either unaware of, or unconcerned by, the presence of half the *Rummager's* wormies. The stumpy Corsican was doing something unspeakable to, or with, what looked to be a filthy, consenting waif.

"Speaking of the past," said Lundquist.

"Gives new meaning to the phrase 'degenerate dwarf,'" said Armand Fornier, ship's astronomer.

IN 2211, when bellywhopping began, Earthlings still managed to disappear unexplainably. Even allowing for bureaucratically driven fingerprinting, retinal imaging, marrow plating, credit carding, breath codifying, personality parallelizing, particle symmetrizing, photographing, 3CD imaging, air-geoid licensing, handwriting analyzing, voice recording, emotion signaturing, and effluvious ascribing, no less than eighteen thousand people per year vanished without a trace, according to the latest statistics from the Division of Worldcitizen Tracking of the One-world Democratic Government.

Where did they go?

Unbeknownst to anyone whose whereabouts were satisfactorily accounted for, the so-called missing went to the Large Magellanic Cloud. And to the Small Magellanic Cloud. And lots of other locales where, for the most part, no man or woman had yet bellywhopped: a shadowy rock orbiting Struve 2398 A, the Perseus and Hercules clusters, Coma Berenices, NGCs 7252 and 4036, Fornax, Sculptor, Wolf-Lundmark-Melotte, 3C273 . . .

They had traveled—and continued to travel—fast. Never were they in any one place for very long.

EISENBEIN, sweaty and wide-eyed, staggered into the dimly lit quarters of the *Rummager's* psychiatrist.

The flute Rouch had been playing descended from his lips to his lap.

"Sorry to bother you on your off hours," said the navigator.

"Not at all. Sit. What's on your mind?"

"Doc, we had sex!"

"We?"

"Carly and I!"

Rouch rubbed his chin with the hand not holding the silver wind instrument. "So if you are to be believed, we now have an episode involving actual physical contact with one of the wraiths."

(Three days in the cloud, and the crew had taken to calling the drifting whatsits "wraiths.")

"Why would I lie?" squawked Eisenbein.

"Yes. Indeed."

"I touched her. She touched me. It was a quickie, I'm embarrassed to confess, yet on another level I'm *not* embarrassed. What I mean is, it was as if Carly, in her altered state or whatever you want to call it—"

"Her wraithlikeness," assisted Rouch. In 2082 "wraithlikeness" had become, for better or worse, an official part of the *Oneworld* lexicon by creeping quietly into *Webster's Eighth Global Cyberspace Dictionary*.

"Yes," said Eisenbein, "that. As I was saying, her wraithlikeness seemed to bring me to, uh, oh, um—"

"Orgasm?"

The navigator giggled nervously. "Yes, exactly. To orgasm more quickly than usual. Certainly more quickly than she and I were ever accustomed to. I'm talking inside of five seconds. But I didn't get the idea that my performance had been poor. It was as if Carly had deliberately drawn my seed out of me with rapid necessity. If anything, she seemed to peak feeling more satisfied than me, if the glowing smile on her face was an indicator."

"The wraiths often tend to glow regardless of their circumstances," Rouch pointed out.

"Yes. True."

"What happened next?"

"She flew out of the gym."

"You had sex in the gym?" blurted Rouch, and it was his turn to be wide-eyed.

Eisenbein blushed.

"That was it?"

"As she was leaving," said the navigator, "she said the remainder of our time together would be short."

"Ah! Another episode of aural contact."

"Another?"

"This morning," explained Rouch, "Fornier claimed he had a speedy conversation with a nineteenth-century Russian poet named Nekrasov. He insists they covered a variety of topics at great length, yet after the author of *Mechty i zvonki* vanished and our beloved astronomer glanced at his wall chronometer, he discovered that less than a minute had elapsed."

A thin, haggard man neither Eisenbein nor Rouch recognized drifted into the shrink's cabin and passed between their



bent legs as they sat across from each other. He departed just as swiftly, through the gray wall at the other side of the cubicle, with an equal lack of ceremony, drinking booze from a paper bag all the while.

"Did you smell that?" asked Eisenbein.

"Yes," affirmed Rouch. "Odoriferous contact."

MANY OF THE fifty thousand stolen air-geoids reported annually to various branches of the Oneworld Law Enforcement Authority actually weren't. Stolen, that is.

An estimated five thousand air-geoid owners lost the starter badges to their vehicles each year, never to find them and left with no choice but to replace them at their own expense.

Items big and small constantly came up missing on Earth. Clothes, jewelry, pets, plutonium. Many of the disappearances were erroneously chalked up to theft. So it had always been.

On what was the temporal equivalent of the *Rummager's* fourth day in the cloud 170,000 light-years away, buildings in New York, New Denver, and Hakodate winked out of sight, along with the surprised souls in them.

Whatever we humans can craft, there's a good chance Mother Nature has already beaten us to the punch

BY DAY FIVE, Fornier was down to vomiting only twice per twenty-four-hour period. Bellywhopping disrupted the gastric juices, for roughly a week afterward, of any wormie who refrained from taking the little pink pills prior to a jump.

"I'm violently allergic to the medicine," he'd explained to his fellow travelers, who were annoyingly sympathetic. "It's not the end of the world."

"No," said Captain Lundquist, her hands clasped stiffly behind her back, "but we're seeing more and more of these wraiths with each passing hour, and I'm beginning to fear what this *does* mean for the fate of the world, if not the universe."

"I'm working on it between upchucks," said the astronomer.

Dozens of wraiths twisted, strolled, somersaulted, dived, rolled, ran, soared, and otherwise motivated through the ship's cabin as Lundquist, Fornier, and four others watched in awe. It was a dizzying swirl of colors, lines, and densities, or lack thereof.

"A theory!" snarled the big blonde. "Armand, give me a theory at least!"

"I think we should get out of here. Go back home."

"That," said Lundquist, "is an opinion, not a theory."

"CAPTAIN! Captain Lundquist!"

She slapped the knob on the intercom nearest to her in wraith-crowded Corridor F.

"Yes, Anastazja, what is it?"

"Go to the nearest portal and take a peek. Quick! Before it sails past!"

She did. What she saw floating by was huge, frightening, and humbling. She got back on the horn with the ship's biologist.

"So what is it?"

"According to the archives," said Klimek, "it's something called the Security Pacific building, Los Angeles, circa 1990."

"Is there any record of this Security Pacific structure disap-

pearing from the city of Los Angeles in or around that year?"

Klimek, Lundquist ascertained, was still in the ship's library, since the captain could hear her clicking keys furiously.

"No," Klimek finally said, followed almost immediately by, "Wait!"

"What is it?" Lundquist said. She realized she'd been posing that powerless query a lot lately.

"Captain, as I sit here reading the history of L.A. in the ship's electronic encyclopedia, the entry is rewriting itself."

"Huh?"

"Apparently the Security Pacific skyscraper *did* evaporate at some point."

Armand is right, thought Lundquist. We need to get the hell out of here.

"WHAT HAVE you done?" the captain demanded to know. It was a rhetorical question, for she—as well as Klimek and Rouch, who, with their leader, stood in a semicircle around the huddled, quaking figure of the navigator—could easily see what he had done.

"I don't want to leave!" sobbed Eisenbein as he shrank back

against the twisted metal of the smoking, ruined wormdrive. "We mustn't go back. Carly is here. I can't lose her again!"

"He's cracking up," Rouch said, as if Eisenbein wasn't crumpled within hearing range at his feet.

"I'm *not* mad!" the navigator yelled angrily. "We've been together."

"Yes," said Rouch, "I know. You filled me in. But it's obvious your priorities are all out of whack. Furthermore, how long's it been since your last session with her?"

"Three—three days."

"I'd say she's gone for good," ventured Rouch. "She told you herself, during your first, uh, union, that your time together was short."

"So, Baldy," chimed in Klimek, "you've zapped our only means of renegotiating the wormhole, leaving us stuck in this damned cloud with these damned wraiths, all because you wanted some nookie?"

She knelt and pummeled Eisenbein in a frustrated fury, prompting Rouch to pull her back.

"Thanks a lot, fool!" she screamed, kicking futilely at air as the burly psychiatrist lifted her away.

"I'm locking you up before you do any more damage," said the captain, scowling at Eisenbein.

"IN A NUTSHELL," Fornier reported, "wormhole navigation disrupts the fabric of the ether with catastrophic results we never could have imagined. That's what Galileo claims."

"Galileo?" sputtered Captain Lundquist. "The guy who discovered the parabolic motion of projectiles? Who provided an alternative to Aristotelian dynamics? The poor sap who got on religion's bad side?"

"No," amended the astronomer, his gaze shifting back and forth among the nine members of the gathered crew who, unlike

Eisenbein, were not currently in the brig. "Same individual, different specifics. In our new reality, Galileo lived in the 25th, 26th, and 27th centuries—praise be to medical science and so forth. He tediously, ingeniously crafted the long-standing Unnatural Laws of Multidimensional Mutation."

"Never heard of 'em," confessed the captain.

"You said 'our new reality,'" repeated Rouch.

"You said 'lived in the 25th, 26th, and 27th centuries,' italics mine," commented Klimek. "This is the 23rd century, in case you've forgotten."

"Not anymore," countered Fornier. "Or maybe so. There's no way of knowing for sure what century it is, or even what time it is. And there's no trusting the ship's clocks, if I read Gal right."

"What is it?" asked Lundquist, resigned to the fact that this had become her chief interrogative, almost like a middle name, whether she liked it or not. "What are you saying, Armand?"

"It boils down to this: Whatever we humans can craft, there's a good chance Mother Nature has already beaten us to the punch."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning there are billions and billions of wormholes that exist naturally throughout the cosmos, independent of black holes."

This was news. Fornier's audience was too stunned to speak.

"Luckily, though, space is darned vast, and each of these wormholes, though incomprehensibly powerful, is smaller than the smallest atom."

"Unlike the wormholes we create in order to bellywhop," mused Lundquist, "which are huge. After all, we need to be able to traverse them."

The astronomer nodded glumly and said, "We should have left well enough alone. Failing to do so, we have reshaped the past and opened windows to the future by intertwining mutually exclusive time streams, insofar as we comprehend the concept of 'mutually exclusive' within the strictures of Einstein's general theory of relativity, which in any event is now—if 'now' still has any applicable definition—bogus. And that's not all."

The ship's physician's eyes bugged out. "There's more to not comprehend?"

"Sadly, yes. Even if that idiot Eisenbein hadn't wrecked the wormdrive, it's doubtful we'd have had a world, an Earth, to return to."

"Why's that?" asked Morrell, the botanist.

"Because our globe is—bit by bit, air-geoid by air-geoid—being sucked into the wormholes that we and the three missions previous to ours have created in Milky Way nearspace. The number of disappearances back on Earth, Gal tells me, are increasing at a phenomenal rate. Grandparents, bridges, basketballs. . . . We've ripped the holy hell out of Earth's stellar neighborhood. One artificially created wormhole wasn't so bad, nor two, nor three—but ours, the fourth, was the straw that broke the camel's back, the telltale tampering that tossed Terra, and ourselves, onto the road to total destruction. Imagine, if you will, a pair of new pants. They last and last, because they're durably sewn. Maybe it takes two or three years to develop a tiny tear along a seam. Then a process of acceleration begins: It requires only another, say, three months for that original tear to lengthen or for new ones to manifest themselves. Now the fabric weakens to the point where the pants can't help but rip out until they become impossible to wear. Well, that's what we've done to the pair of pants that is our quad-

rant of the void: We've split its seams, baring the butt of the blue planet—and every other object in our solar system and a good deal beyond—to unspeakable, unstoppable forces, including those that warp the workings of time itself. Lesson? You don't create a bunch of wormholes for the purpose of distant journeying and then pretend you've just been skipping stones across a pond."

"You are, to put it mildly, screwed," Galileo said as he wafted in and out of the meeting.

"No wonder he got in trouble with religion, talking like that," Klimek said.

"What are these wraiths we've been seeing?" asked Rouch.

"Living, breathing human beings," answered Fornier, "from our past, present, and future. They haven't died; they're inhabiting other dimensions. In fact, death itself has been redefined thanks to the wormholes: It's no longer a cessation of life, but rather a passage into other dimensions, where time doesn't necessarily flow at the same rate as it does for us here in this ship. That's why my sixty-second chat with Nekrasov seemed to last forever."

The plexishield from a luxury-style air-geoid glided into the room, above the assemblage's heads, and out.

"Needless to say," appended the astronomer, "we're beginning to notice inanimate objects, whose variety will soon proliferate wildly."

"There goes a suit of armor!" burst out the botanist, extending a finger at the burnished chainmail as its visor, couteres, and cod-piece went flapping by.

"These sightings," said Fornier, waving his arms at his sides, "represent people and things being sucked from Earth's past, present, and future by wormholes with enough clout to distort space, time, and the very nature of reality on and around our world. I suppose if we were on Earth at this precise moment—'moment' having lost most of its meaning, precise or otherwise, at this stage of the game—we would get the impression that reality is being sloughed away right before our bewildered eyes."

"This is a lot to absorb," said Klimek.

"So Earth is finished?" asked the captain.

What appeared to be Antarctica—or a sizable portion of it—went spinning through space, filling the conference room portal for a good half an hour (insofar as the crew had once understood the notion of "half an hour"). Everybody gawked fearfully at the snowy peaks and wind-carved valleys glittering in starlight and subdued by deep shadows, respectively.

"I think so," said Fornier. 🍌



About the author

Kent Robinson is the author of more than one hundred published or soon-to-be-published stories. His work has appeared in *Midnight Zoo*, *Zeta Magazine*, *Aberations*, *Red Herring Mystery Magazine*, *Oui*,

The Kit-Cat Review, *Mind in Motion*, *Radio Void*, and *Lime Green Bulldozers*, to name a few.



About the illustrator

Anita Kunz's clients include *Time Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *Sony Music*, and *Random House Publishing*. Her award-winning paintings and sculptures have appeared in galleries worldwide and are in the permanent collections at the Library of Congress and Musée Militaire de France in Paris.



Looking in the Mirror?

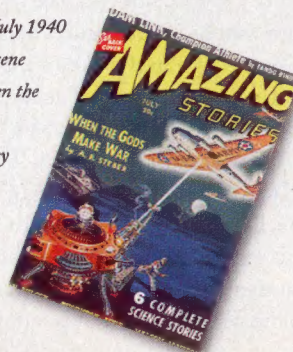
Forget about what form Martians may take. How would you suppose a *Martian* might expect us to look? Hopefully, not like the character portrayed on the back cover of the July 1940 issue of *AMAZING Stories*! According to an article in this issue, “As Mars Sees Us,” by Henry Gade, one Martian’s response to this age-old question describes the earthling as a “fat, contented creature, with a large body, bullet head, short legs and webbed hands and feet.” (The webbing because the earthman is “quasi-amphibian,” the “fat” because of the overabundance of food on Earth and underabundance of ambition, and the contentment because—well, who wouldn’t be content under these conditions?)

AS MARS SEES US

A Martian reconstruction of the Earthman, deduced from what he can discover of our world by observation and analysis, might very logically be such a creature as is shown here. (For complete explanation see page 144.)



► **TAKE COVER.** The front cover of the July 1940 issue of *AMAZING Stories* depicts a scene from the A. R. Steber short story “When the Gods Make War.” This story centered around the “weird mystery of the Valley of Fools,” and the talking God.



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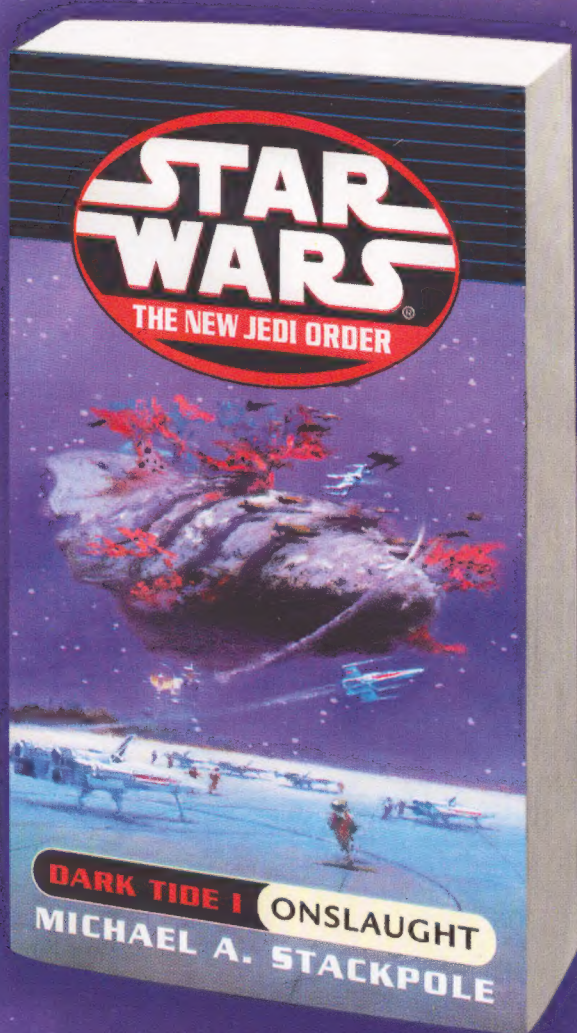


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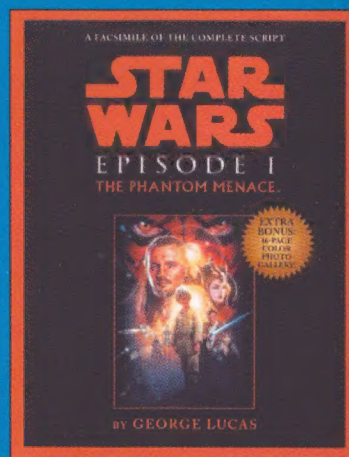
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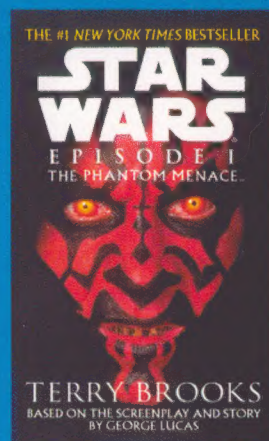
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